Child of Crime
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Child of Crime

by orphan_account

Summary

Peter became homeless not long after he turned into Spider-Man. When one runs the loss of money, he has no choice but to participate into the world of pickpocketing.

That is, until he is caught.

disclaimer: i do not own ANY of the marvel characters. all belong to the rights of marvel and their original owner. i only own my oc’s in this.

update: currently being re-edited into a new story since this was made when i first joined the fandom and i knew shit-all about any of the characters :D

remastered: https://archiveofourown.org/works/26177851

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> this is a little thing i thought of one evening and have finally developed it into a story x3 hope you like!!
>
> this is also my first marvel fanfic , so i'm really sorry if everyone is out of character. i'm gradually editing it and changing a lot of things so it is at least enjoyable to read. i don't claim to be a good writer and never will. i just did this for fun :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony blames Steve for this venture. Only the night before had the blonde made one of his infamous "Good and Bad" speeches. Bless his heart—Tony couldn't help but feel smug throughout the whole 'meeting', if that's what you or anyone else would like to call it.

Steve suggested they get out more. And the supersoldier made sure to point his burning gaze towards Tony. They all agreed it would be best to enjoy the fresh air of New York's polluted atmosphere, but Tony could not be bothered to explain to the old man—even though he has stated time and time again—that he is, by no means, an outdoor person. Leave him with a screwdriver, hammer, some form of wires and a connection purely to technology, he is in, what he calls, his, "Happy Zone."

That wasn't going to happen. Not while Steve was around. Even his old friend Bucky murmured off to the side that perhaps—just a little—Steve was being ... pessimistic about what the Avengers enjoyed most of what they were doing. Sam had heard, agreeing with the white wolf himself, which earned a disapproving glance from Steve.

All in all, Steve just wanted what is best for them. He hadn't exactly forced Tony to go out the very next day. In fact, Tony hadn't seen Steve all morning. (He didn't have to wonder whether he was in the gym or just taking a jog— *run* —around the blocks of Brooklyn). But Tony believed there is some truth to Steve's words. Maybe apart of the reason why Tony liked spending so much time inside is so he can avoid the media and public-eye. Being cooped up in a lab all day with two interactive robots, an A.I. and constant noise of fire around someone can depress anyone to some extent.

In other words, he needed to get out.

He decided on his little adventure; he would make a trip to the shops to do some food shopping. Very unlike Tony; even he was dumbfounded by his decision. But they needed more food because Thor required a lot of food as it was. And Tony was also running low on his coffee supply, so desperate times calls for desperate measures.

He didn't think anything exciting would come from buying some foods and drinks for the Avengers Facility. A few people recognised him, even asked for a photo and then left him in peace. He was fine with that. It was the paparazzi he couldn't stand.

When he walked from the little shopping centre, he was not expecting to be bombarded with

flashing lights and many people giving him an avalanche of already answered questions.

“Mr. Stark! Over here, please!”

“Hello, Mr. Stark! I have a few questions...”

“Mr. Stark, this is live and we have questions that need answering—”

Tony comically pulled up the bags he was holding, trying to cover his face. He did this whilst shouting, “Tony Stark has nothing to say!” And he tried pushing his way through the crowd.

Who the hell decided it would a good idea to get out more? Oh yes. Tony was going to murder Steve.

With a push, he managed to squeeze his body through the sea of people and when he saw the opportunity, he ran.

Exercise was never his strong point. As a kid, he preferred spending his time in the science labs, cooking up new, wanted and needed experiments just for his own benefit. He never joined in with the boys football or any of the hard rugby teams. He needed to make his peace by expanding his mind.

In other words (or in Pepper’s words) it was a funny sight seeing Tony Stark running from a barrel of thundering feet and lightning bolts of the camera’s. Oh, Pepper would be rolling around on the floor right now.

All Tony kept on doing was cursing Steve; swearing that later—he didn’t give a jack’s-ass whether Bucky was balls deep inside of Steve—he was going to actually have to toss Steve out of the window. Not that Tony is assuming that Steve and Bucky are together but ... they definitely are.

Tony kept up his pace, shopping bags nearly flying from his fingers until he caught sight of an alleyway. Not Tony’s best shot, but right now, God isn’t answering any of his prayers.

With one more swift dash, he made his entry to the mouth of the alley.

He pressed his back against the rugged brick wall, wheezing breath putting Steve’s asthma to shame as the people walked ran passed.

He waited solidly for a good five minutes before his heart diminished to a normal, functioning rate again. Only then did he notice he wasn’t alone.

A few metres away, a small, huddled figure slept on the ground.

Tony turned more to get a better view of the figure.

When he stepped aside, he found the face of a really young looking boy, lying on his side with his face almost pressed to the damp cardboard he was lying on.

His pale skin contrasted the dank darkness of the filthy alley. There was dirt splashed across his face; long, dark eyelashes casting shadows across his hollow cheeks. His hands were curled up to his rising and falling chest. The sweater he wore was a simple navy blue with what Tony could only make out with some sort of yellow logo on it. It looked so dirty and the boy was practically drowning in it. He also had some ill-fitting jeans that had many holes and rips in them. Tony was

pretty sure it wasn't a fashion statement; they looked like genuine holes. The shoes he wore were worn and the laces barley done.

The Stark then let his eyes travel to the boys face again and observed the boy even more. The light brown curls he bore were long, licking at the back of his neck and curling over his ears. They were practically begging to be cut. For his curly, greasy fringe was flopping into his closed eyes.

Heart sinking, Tony found that there were not only clumps of dirt in his hair, but what seemed to be tangled bits of blood as well. And then he saw the outstanding bruises this boy wore across his cheeks, his knuckles and hands itself. God only knows what lies underneath that clothing.

Tony wanted to run.

He had seen so many homeless people before; never in his entire life had he ever seen someone so young. This boy could not be any older than at least eighteen. Maybe even younger. He was a child at that. And the thought made Tony ill to the stomach.

Before he made any further observations and walked from the alley to go home—home to a warm bed, roof over his head, a full tummy, with people who care about him—he looked inside one of the food bags.

As quietly as he could, he reached in and fished out a box of pop-tarts that were meant for Thor. However, there were a couple more in. Not only that, he also ripped open the bag of bread and carefully lied a few bits of it on top of the pop-tart box by the boys bunched up hands. If only he had some water. A water bottle of some sort so he could give it to the kid.

Tony sighed tiredly.

That's all he can do. It's not like he's going to bump into the boy again, so it didn't really matter all that much.

He left the alley with his heart cold and aching. He completely forgot about the plan to murder Steve. He forgot about the paparazzi incident. And he (purposely) forgot to put all of the shopping away, leaving it to Steve or/and Bruce to divide.

He went to bed, wide awake and thinking all night.

Chapter End Notes

> i'll be switching between tony and peter's p.o.v's. so the next will be peter's. it'll be like a little pattern. also, warnings are in the tags, just so people are aware!
>
> i swear, in the end, i will bring happiness to our spider-child.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

warnings for this whole story up ahead:

descriptions/use of drugs
near rape/non-con
mentions/implied of prostitution
bullying/abuse emotionally, mentally and physically
implied depression/bipolar disorder/ptsd/anxiety/panic attacks/insomnia
starvation and dehydration
referenced/implied pedophelia warning
emetophobia warning

if any of these make you uncomfortable, i do not suggest reading this fan fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter woke with a start. His stiff fingers uncurled themselves from the depths of his palm and his eye sight uncovered the blurs of the dark underworld he has now gotten used to waking up to. Though, he was never used to waking up to food in front of him.

Food? Who had put food there?

He scrambled up, back now pressing into the wall. The haze of his vision still hasn't passed, just like most mornings. When his eye sight regained it's function, he found that—that *yes*—there was indeed food there.

A few pieces of bread stacked neatly on top of a box of pop-tarts ... oh ... he hasn't had pop-tarts in a good couple of years. And the sight of them almost made his dry mouth water. But then he remembered the others.

This is so much food. More than his pathetic and weak stomach can handle.

The person who had spotted him and handed this to him must have a lot of time on their hands. Normally, someone would just leave a dollar there, or, if someone was feeling generous, two. But never this.

With a shaky hand, he picked up a slice of bread and slowly brought it to his awaiting mouth.

The taste of fresh bread hit his tongue and he sighed, grateful for the kindness of this persons heart. Whoever they were, Peter wished he knew their name at least. In the future, if they ever had a problem, something they needed fixing, he could cleanse it and make it all better. Although the lack of nutrients and deprivation of sleep weakened not only his physicality, spirit as well, he still had the energy to help those in need.

So when he finished his piece of bread, and selfishly took another, he picked up the rest in his awaiting arms and travelled further down the alley.

His mind went places when he was all on his own like this. It was a rarity for him; most of his days

he spent with the others, fighting for survival and living off weed and stolen items.

Peter was always being peer-pressured into smoking, sniffing cocaine and the God-awful stuff to try heroin, but he always refused. Mainly because he knew he couldn't afford to be high when out saving people from that same exact bad habit himself.

He knows, just when entering the dark tunnel of others, that he is the biggest hypocrite to ever walk this Earth.

The thoughts of those couple of years ago stopping thieves, drugs, bullies ... they all seemed so petty. He still does those jobs, but after saving the day, he becomes a mess of destruction. Every time, he felt like clawing at his own skin, like the devil trying to rid himself of his own sins ... but he cannot, because it's what he is prone to. As if it's his destiny to live this way.

He thieves. He had taken drugs before to sell them again. He even bullied kids to get things he needed. Though, it has been a long time since he had done that. He was never physical, but he knew how to manipulate to get his own way. And he felt so God-damn *ashamed* of himself. But how else was he meant to survive the wilderness?

He only kept around to help others. But, when he's not helping others, when he becomes Peter Parker again, he kicks another person down just by being himself. He, who killed his Uncle Ben. He, who was too selfish to realise when Aunt May went missing. He, who never returned any of Ned Leeds phone calls.

He's a monster. And what good does a monster do roaming the Earth? Nothing.

These thoughts that consumed and damaged his mind more and more each day were forgotten when he was finally inside of the tunnel.

This tunnel was damp with leaking pipes and rotting sewage. It was alive, dominated by rats and old homeless men. The cage stinking of weed, alcohol, vomit. No longer did the smell destroy Peter. It was normal. He was pretty sure the majority of himself smelt like weed and all sorts. The others he hung out with were drug addicts. And they were the only ones vaguely nice to him. The only ones he would consider closest as friends.

What broke him the most were the children; children much younger than him, whom had been here before him and started all of this before him. They were admittedly more experienced and blemished than him. They could of had a childhood like him. They never have. And they never will.

Upon seeing the five kids that Peter has grown to know, he made his guilt glide over, food provided clutched tightly to his chest. The little gang consisted a mix of three girls and two boys. The leader was a girl, red-head, scattered with freckles, a hot temper and dull blue eyes to match the thunderstorm that had overtaken her life. Her name Emily with only a ragged jumper and black, torn leggings to keep her warm, hugging at her skinny knees.

She smiled up at Peter when he made his way over. They all did. Even brighter so to see he was carrying something that looked promising. The youngest, a boy named Harry, pushed through the crowd of tall kids, staring wide-eyes innocence at Peter. The only other kid in here who had just become new to this nature. Only a month ago. And he looked up to Peter so much—it made him sick.

"Is that *food?*" Harry asked hopefully. Peter smiled, it never reaching his eyes; he bent down to his knees, ignoring the damp that soaked his jeans. He ripped up the bread for them to share. The kids

greedily gobbled down the food, starved and determined.

“Is there any water?” the youngest girl, Allison, asked. Her once shiny blonde hair was tangled and dirtied. The only thing that remained pure about her were her puppy-dog brown eyes. As if she was still hoping for a moment of clarity. Something that would most likely never come. She was only seven-years-old.

Peter shook his head miserably. “I’m afraid not, you guys.” At this, all pouted, even Emily. “I promise I will bring some for you later.”

“A whole *truck full!*” exclaimed Thomas, small hands rising above his head to indicate how big he wanted the tank full of water to be.

“No! A whole *tank* full!” said Millicent. She also had the same blonde hair as Allison, just shorter, her fringe now being able to be tucked behind her ears. Peter would have to give them another hair cut soon.

“What’s a tank?” Harry tugged at Millicent’s stained t-shirt curiously. As Millicent started to explain what a tank is, Emily, nine-years-old, stared at Peter, a statement waiting on her lips.

“Your friends are asking for you,” she said. “They said something about you being late for a delivery.”

Peter hung his head for a second before standing up. He still had the box of pop tarts tucked in his arms. With his free hand, he placed a hand atop of Emily’s head, ruffling her red hair before releasing her again. “Thanks, Emily.”

“Do you promise to bring back water later?” Her tone had always been so authoritative. Even when Peter had first met her three years ago, when she was only six. Arrogant and demanding, this girl practically taught Peter the baby steps to being on his own. And it was thanks to her that Peter was prepared to go out into the world of pick-pocketing.

“I will.”

“I want to hear you say I promise.”

Peter sighed, his cheeks puffing out at the pathetic kiddy demand. But he had to. Because if he didn’t promise, there was no guaranty for Emily. She had to feed her friends. Otherwise they would have no energy for pick-pocketing.

“I promise, Emily.”

With that, she was perfectly happy and turned around to her friends. Peter walked on, keeping his eyes trained on the trail he has embraced these many years. His friends were right at the end of the tunnel, right by the light that then leads into an open wood. But as he walked on this trail, the old, filthy homeless people came out to play. Peter couldn’t count the amount of times a day the men and women would prey on him, taunt him, ruffle him up. He may be used to the attention, but it didn’t mean he liked the attention. There was a reason why he kept the kids right at the entrance of the tunnel; they can keep away from any of these dirty freaks.

“What’s tha’ ya got there, boy?” a grumble of a voice called out. It echoed around the buzzing tunnel’s surface. A man, long, hageres grey hair, a nasty smirk and limp came waddling over. He had a typical beanie on that pulled back his hair away from his face and the beginnings of a beard that started. “Is tha’ food? We need some.”

Peter backed away, a brave face edged on. His eyes brows were furrowed and he tried to seem as if he was looking down on the man, when, in fact, he had to look up. “This food is for my friends,” he said sternly.

The man laughed. A high, horrible, maniac sound. “We’re your friends. You're jus’ like us. Now, c’mon, boy. Hand it over.”

“No.”

Peter turned, backing away again and started to walk towards the end of the tunnel. He heard the jumpy footsteps behind him. Before he could even think about speeding up his walk, the man’s hands grabbed a hold of his shoulder and hauled him back. He went sprawling onto his backside, nearly banging his head on the floor. The box of pop tarts fell to the floor with a full thud. Many other looked up to see the commotion. The man landed a awful kick to his side and the bent down to pick up the box. Then, Peter’s prayers were answered when he heard the familiar, cheeky, British voice of Jordan.

The young man, a few years older than Peter, waltzed over like a ghost. He pushed the man back, kicking him in the side like the man had done to Peter. “C’mon, Alfred, leave the kid alone!” He aimed another kick, extracting a pained moan from the man. “He only wanted to deliver us some pop tarts. Get outta’ here.” Another kick and this time, the man shuffled away, holding his side.

Jordan smirked, sniggering to himself as he picked up the box on the ground. He gave a lift for Peter and the boy was up again, rubbing his own side and cringing at the pain.

“You need anythin' for that, bro?” Jordan slapped him on the back, making Peter double over from the sheer strength of the taller man. He then laughed, nudging Peter for him to walk forwards. “Of course ya don’t. You’re as fit as a fiddle, you are. Kinda jealous, actually.” He pulled Peter in for a side hug, keeping him under his wing. “Where’d ya get these beloved treasures then, aye?”

Peter shrugged. “Don’t know ... they were just there this morning.”

“Wha’ a rarity, I tell ya. Well done, Pete. Ya did a fine job then. Knew that adorable face would work out someday.”

Under his gaze, Peter blushed, his eyes burning. He walked along, trying to keep up with Jordan’s large strides until they reached they end where three other boys were with one girl.

“Petey! There you are!” yelled Connor. “And what’s that you’ve got there, Jordy?”

“Pop tarts!” he beamed, throwing the box over his head to establish his point. All froze for a second, before bursting into smiles and laughing triumphantly.

As always, Jordan took the glory. He made up a story that he had managed to smuggle them from a family of four. They all had one each. There was a good two left and Jordan gave them to the girl, Aaliyah.

Peter never liked her. She was cruel and savage. From the moment her and Peter stepped in each-others bubbles, hatred radiated from the both of them. And Peter has never hated someone; Aaliyah just takes the cake. So as she took a bite of the uncooked pop tart, her eyes knowingly sought Peter’s, smirking at him. She knew it was him who had these pop tarts in the first place. And all her thanks was to mock him.

“Peter, I got a job for you.” A boy in the group, Carter, came over and pushed at his back to bring him forwards. The others were occupied, Dorian taking out a batch of weed and sharing it among

the others.

They made it to the outside where the branches and trees were growing. Peter worked out long ago that they were at the very end of New York City, so the starts of a huge forest took place. It was quite a famous place for where the homeless live, but no one ever bothered them. Not even the police were concerned for the drug exchanges, mainly because no matter how much people they arrest and take away the drugs, a new one will always come about right after.

“What is it I need to do?” Peter has learned to do as he’s told likewise. The last time he refused, he ended with a couple of broken ribs. And he’s sure they still have yet to heal properly.

“I hear that the beloved Avengers are making more appearances in public.”

“The Avengers?” said Peter curiously. He knew who they are, very obviously. “How comes?”

Carter raised his eyebrows at him. “I don’t know everything, Pete. Why not focus on what you are to do instead of asking stupid questions?”

Peter only nodded at this, pulling his old school sweater over his shoulders more. When he first got this sweater at fifteen, it was only slightly big, as he has always been unfortunately small. However, living on the streets for the last two years has sunken his skin and made him delicate to any touch. Now, the sweater engulfed his frame, bottom reaching just above his mid-thighs and the sleeves swallowing his hands, over the tips of his lithe fingers. If Carter is saying what he thinks he’s going to say, he will have to change into something more appropriate. Something that will disguise him better.

“As you know, pretty much most of them live a healthy life. They have money, Pete. *Money*. And we’re gonna get it. Are you following?”

“Yes,” answered Peter.

“You’re the most nimble and swift, so we’re going to have to test you. Give you a practise run. From my knowledge, our old man Captain America is late for his morning run. Even better, he hasn’t gone out today.” Carter held this smile on his face, it stretching towards his gleaming, brown eyes hostile. “I believe he’s out with Sam Wilson, if you check our schedules. You’re gonna have to make a quick escape, mind you. Both are quick to catch onto something suspicious.”

It looks as if Peter is in for a long day. Spider-Man will have to wait until this evening. Just like last night. Hence why he ended up asleep in the alley like that. He must have passed out as soon as he placed his jeans and sweater on. His red and blue hoodie and trousers were gravely hidden away in his backpack, somewhere in that alley somewhere. If Peter’s calculations were correct—and if his memory doesn’t deceive him—his backpack was snugly tucked away behind a rubbish bin of some sort. He had no mind to worry until he couldn’t find it. That had happened more times than he would care to admit.

There was always certain people they would target. It was a long process, because they had never robbed anyone such as the Avengers before. It was too risky. Now that Jordan and Carter have followed them, they have created a schedule for where they are and what they are doing.

“You ready, my man?”

Peter nodded again, rubbing his hands together.

“First of all, you can’t go out like that. So where are your clothes?”

“Somewhere...”

“Well, you’re gonna have to find them. Otherwise you’ll risk getting caught. And we can’t have that. You’re one of the best bets we’ve got.”

Whether it was a compliment or not—because being complimented for being good at thieving is definitely not a good thing—Peter took it. Because the last time he ever felt truly loved was a very long time ago. He had no choice but to take it.

Carter took him back to the other. Upon seeing them, Jordan got up, the sclera part of his eyes already beet red. He still had some sense to talk, as his booming, low voice shouted, “Today’s a day we get lucky, lads! We ain’t stoppin’ nothing until we get what is rightfully ours.”

Peter wanted to say that nothing they have stolen is rightfully theirs. They do not deserve any of the things they have achieved on their hunts. In fact, he wanted to cry out that fact, but what stopped him was fearing death. He knew, there and now, that anyone of them could beat him until he took his last, pathetic breath.

“We’re gonna be rich, are we, Jordy?” said Conor, eyes gleaming in the dim light.

Jordan smiled, smacking Conor on the back as a friendly gesture. “I tell ya’, only the best of us will get that far. And I’m taking all ya’ boys down with me.”

He swooped down, taking a seat next to Aaliyah and nuzzled at her neck. He then looked back at Peter, offering a joint. For the ridiculous dozenth time, Peter shook his head no. He’s getting low, and the others can see that. The only way to bring him to the top again is to get him as high as a kite. However, Peter would never resort to that. Never. He swore on May’s life that he would never do that to her.

“You ready ta’ go, Pete? We’ll be right behind ya, buddy.”

Peter nodded. They cast him away, wishing him the most of luck for his adventure.

He walked passed the old man, the children, whom were now reduced to three. (The others must have ventured out). Emily say with them, her piercing gaze reaching Peter’s. They nodded in a silent agreement and finally—*oh so finally*—Peter stepped out into the polluted air of New York City.

His feet automatically walked him to the place he had last stayed and where he had won his previous treasures of food. Perhaps if he stayed there again, the kind person would be back? He shook his head at the thought. There was no such thing as a kind person. He was lucky. The person had a weak moment and had offered his items up for a starving child. Something as valuable as that person’s heart would not be replaced, yet will also not be remembered.

Soon, he reached his little alley. It was so squashed together that Peter could stand in the middle, spread both his arms out and touch both of the walls. The only reason why he knew of this tactic is because many times has he climbed this wall. As of now, he checked both ends of the alley, sweat prickling at the base of his neck in a nervous doubt.

When he saw that the coast was clear, he proceeded to press his palms flat against the wall until the familiar stick of the webs took place. Efficiently, he began crawling the bricked wall, still looking out for any sign of potential human activity until he reached the top of a broken roof. He climbed over, his ribs screaming in protest, his legs swinging over the banister. On his feet, he looked around until he saw his rucksack, smothered in thick layers of the webs he had created.

Carefully, he removed them and adjusted the grip he had on his now uncovered rucksack. It wasn't a big one, but good enough to fit at least two pairs of clothes. Reaching in, he fished out his black hoodie with his jogging bottoms and black, fake, converses. One way to be typical, but it camouflaged him the most. Peter didn't want to be seen as Pickpocket Pete, Spider-Man or as Peter Parker. He didn't want to be known as anyone. But he had a job to help the other side of town out and to help those poor kids survive.

He has no choice.

The sooner he was dressed, the more ready he felt. He placed his other clothing back in his rucksack and webbed it up again. Currently, he was running out of webbing. He would have to make some more soon enough without anyone noticing.

He climbed back down the wall and sought out on his journey.

He had a clear idea of what he was getting. The café Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson visited was quite well known. They went there every Monday morning or afternoon. Peter had a fair chance of seeing them.

As normal, the streets of New York were a hurricane of busy people. Many times Peter bashed into someone talking on the phone or pushed over. He managed to sweep passed the chattering and shoves before locating the ever-famous café of the Steve Rogers; also known as *The* Captain America. He peeked his head around the corner, dropping his hoodie so he didn't look as suspicious.

Thankfully, the café from the inside and outside looked occupied by unsuspecting people. Not many were sitting outside, trying to shield from the gusty winds and coming rain. But his eyes instantly found his targets. Although there was a lot of purses and wallets with bags (with valuable things, Peter bets) on display, his top priority at this moment was Mr. Sam Wilson and Mr. Steve Rogers. In the back of his mind, he was telling himself to go for it. Whilst the two men are talking, with Steve's satchel on the back of his chair and Sam's rucksack open, behind the back of his chair ... it was a perfect set. His heart was thumping wildly in his chest, crying at him to stop what he is doing. It isn't right. None of it will ever be okay.

But he needs the kids to survive. That's all he asked for.

He wasn't to go straight way. He had to keep an eye out for the workers.

One woman in particular came up to Sam and Steve, long, blonde hair and shining blue eyes. She wore a friendly smile and spoke to them whilst pouring them some tea or coffee; Peter couldn't decide what it was. His eyes backtracked to the inside of the café. They all looked busy in there as well.

He timed himself, counting under his breath whilst his hands fumbled for his trouser pocket, feeling the few coins in there. He could easily settle down and have some tea, but he wanted to get the job done as soon as possible.

The woman walked away after a brief smile to the two men and finally, no workers were stalking the outside of the café; only three other pairs of people were sitting down, engrossed in their own conversations.

A deep sigh later, Peter cast himself away from the shadows and let himself be quick and efficient. He learned to not stand in an open area and go so slowly; you need to be swift and agile, otherwise you will get caught.

His feet gracefully scraped the path and once he got within reaching distance, he passed Steve's chair, but not without snatching the satchel from the chair. It barley brushed at the man's back before Peter managed to direct himself to the corner again. The satchel was a dark, vintage brown colour. He pressed his back against the wall and calmed his breathing, his pounding heart slowing it's dramatic pace.

Inside held an A4 sketch book with two sketching pencils attached to the outside. Also, hidden underneath, was a vintage wallet that matched the satchel. He dug in and found a couple worthy notes. A ten and twenty.

It's not much to feed him, the kids and the others. But enough to get the kids a few things at least.

Then, he found Steve's card. It was a light yellow with black on it, shiny, and holding his numbers. The only thing Peter now needed was his pin number, which, for him, is an easy task to do. The amount of times he has hacked into someone else's bank account is more than enough he can remember.

The last thing he found was an old, battered watch. Except it wasn't a watch, for Peter inspected it closer, flipping the lid and found a black and white picture of a beautiful young lady. She must have been his love long ago, unless Steve was still really old fashioned and had his girlfriend in this rarity.

A sudden wave of guilt washed over him. This was Steve Rogers' stuff—things that kept him going. To Peter, or to anyone, he could see that Steve seemed to be a very lonely man. The blue in his eyes don't shine like others should. It looked from here, when Peter looked at him and Sam Wilson together, that Sam was doing all the talking, as if trying to brighten Steve's day. Peter didn't know much about the blonde, but Peter is no idiot; he just observed closely.

He sighed and made a vow to keep Steve's satchel and the purity of his things inside safe. Now all he had to do was get to Sam's things. But as soon as he was about to hide the satchel to prepare for another mission, he found the both Steve and Sam were no longer talking, but instead searching the grounds ... in look for Steve's satchel.

It looks as if Peter isn't going to the tunnel's tonight. If he returned without some of Sam Wilson's worth, then he would receive a tremendous backlash from the others and perhaps a very unhappy Emily to deal with.

He went back to his normal alleyway, stepped up onto the abandoned balcony of the building and let himself ponder. And to distract his mind of the sins he has commuted alone today, he roamed his fingers of the sketch book, on the first page reading: **This sketch book belongs to Steven Rogers**.

Another pitiful sigh escaped him. He felt the burn of tears in the corner of his eyes as he looked from page to page, sketch to sketch. There were mixes of funny little cartoons, mostly containing of animals, to sketches of real-life landscapes done in the moment, to outstanding pencil works of his friends. There were a couple of the woman he saw in that picture; one of her young, smiling, and another of her old and wrinkly, implying that Peter was correct in assuming she was someone from Steve Rogers' past.

The most contained of a man Peter's never seen before.

The strokes of the pencil emphasised this man used to have short cut hair, with a uniform and a kind, calm face. Then he transformed into something darker, with light stubble ghosting his face—dark, almost black eyes and shoulder length, wavy hair made up the handsome shape of his face.

What caught Peter's eye was the metal arm producing from his bicep. Then, it came back to the man again, just smiling, laughing, eyes crinkling at the edges.

There was even a sketch of The Tony Stark, one of Peter's most loved and long idol's.

He couldn't stop looking at them, endeared by Captain America's secret and stupendous talent.

A splat of water dropped onto the book, a page which contained a small, cartoon dog. It smudged and Peter quickly closed it, not wanting the drawings to falter from the ugly weather. He placed the sketch book back in the satchel, and, along with his own rucksack, webbed the two to protect it from the now spitting rain.

He had a long night ahead of him. Hopefully Spider-Man will be able to fix the troubles and make up for the disgusting acts he has portrayed today.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for the great comments on the first chapter! they truly all made my day much better!

i had quite a few of you ask if i had an uploading schedule. i have been able to work one out for the time being (and hopefully always). uploads are certain every single wednesday. if i miss a day, i will have a perfectly good reason xD some days i may even upload an extra chapter, such as on saturday.

again, thank you everyone! i do hope you enjoy this chapter! <3

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A little loss of innocence is what brought them into this situation. Tony knows for a fact that Steve isn't innocent—maybe the most of the team, but no one talks about that. He's a grown man in his late 20's. The reason why Tony is onto this subject is because it seems as if Steve has lost the last bit of his childhood innocence left ever since he had lost his satchel, which, apparently, contained his sketch pad; that sketch pad allowed him to be himself and fully relax from being Captain America.

Tony had no knowledge of Steve's art talent until Bucky reluctantly told him. The blonde was moping around, which Steve never did. He was quieter than usual, his shoulders sagged and he had the impression of a kicked puppy. It was almost unnerving seeing a sad Steve Rogers. Tony thought he would never live to see the day, but here they were.

At this moment, Tony has contacted the café they were at to see anyone on CCTV. They have not gotten back to him yet and it's been a day. He will have to go in himself to see anything. He told Steve of this and the man just smiled and nodded at him.

It wasn't unusual for Steve to be quiet. He needn't say anything because he is always there, easily seen with his tall stature ... never saying a word unless necessary. Bucky had said a while back when they first started to get to know each-other that Steve had always been a little quieter from the rest. Considering Steve now only said a few words just added to this; Tony asked Friday of his situation but without proper full body analogy, it is impossible for Friday to cast a diagnosis.

Tony left it for a while, just in search for Steve's beloved satchel. It couldn't of gone far. Where was Spider-Man when they needed him? Isn't he the one to stop little, petty crimes like this? He's still active, and Tony and the others have tried to track him down and propose an alliance, but before they could even take a glimpse of him, he's already swinging off into an abyss, not to be seen until a couple of days later. And the procedure starts all over again.

They have given up, apart from Wanda, because she feels as if they need someone like him on their team. Or maybe it was the fact they knew Spider-Man was quite young, and perhaps a bit immature like she is. Like her brother was.

Leaving a hefty sigh, Tony switched off his computer, running a hand down his face. He feels so tired, even though he slept last night. He didn't realise they needed a happy Steve around to keep up the teams energy until now. When Steve is okay, it puts everyone at rest. He just couldn't understand what was so sad about losing a sketch book and, what? —a picture of his first love, Peggy? Tony didn't want to sound brash—because where would that get him?—but Peggy passed away a couple of years back now. And about the sketch pad? Tony didn't know. He could just get a new one. But he's no artist, so how could he relate?

The man trudged back towards the main area where Steve, Bucky and Natasha were. Steve was talking to Natasha whilst she listened. Bucky was half asleep, head leaning back against the sofa and arms crossed over his chest. When he stepped in, all jumped at the opportunity to stare intently at him, of what has become of Steve's situation.

He shrugged, watching the hope that glimmered in Steve's eyes to disappointment.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” he said simply. He stuffed his hands in his trouser-pockets, moving over to the sofa. “They won’t get back to me. The only chance we have is if we go up there ourselves tomorrow morning and see the CCTV footage. Then we can catch the bastard who did this, yeah?” He mentally cringed at himself, having to talk to Steve as if he were five-years-old.

“Thanks, Tony,” said Steve, settling back into the sofa. He must have changed his mind half-way from relaxing to pacing because he suddenly jumped up and strut out of the room as if he had just remembered an important meeting he must attend.

“James?” Tony turned to the blonde’s friend who just shrugged. “How did he lose his man purse?”

Natasha and Bucky both snorted. Once Natasha relaxed back, she let her feet up on the coffee table which Tony had time-and-time again said he disapproved of. God, he felt like a father scolding his children for some petty, little *crime*.

“Like Sam said, they were talking, Steve went to take out his wallet and it wasn’t there.” Natasha explained lightly to him. The speech had been rehearsed—or at least, that is what it sound like. Everyone had to repeat themselves over and over again to get the right story.

“I can’t believe you guys actually thought he had lost it,” grumbled Tony. “It’s obvious it was stolen. I mean, how much was he carrying at the time?”

“Thirty dollars,” said Bucky.

“You do realise that’s a lot of money," said Natasha, "especially for someone like Steve."

Tony nodded, making his way to the bar to grab himself a drink. Screw what Steve said about setting himself a healthy diet. “I did offer him the thirty back.”

Bucky stowed himself away from the back of the sofa, shaking his head at Tony. “Don’t ever offer money to Steve; especially when he can’t pay you back. We grew up in a time where we went to bed hungry because we simply couldn’t afford the luxury of food, so that much money would have fed and clothed not only him and his mother, but my family too.” It was never like Bucky to become serious, but at least it’s a known fact they have now discovered about Steve. Tony had never thought of it like that, mainly because he never went without food, nor a warm bed as such. It made him feel guilty.

“I’m sorry...” he mumbled, taking a sip of his whiskey.

“What was that?” mused Natasha. To emphasise her mockery, she put a hand behind her ear, meaning she didn’t hear him properly. “Did Anthony Stark just apologise.”

“Go to hell, Romanoff — I apologise when I’m in the wrong.”

“I beg to differ,” muttered Bucky. He too got up and stretched his hands high above his head. His metal arm was looking well and polished. Tony had wanted to take some tests on it when the man had first started living in the Avengers building, but Steve nearly killed him for suggesting such a thing.

“Where are you going, Buckaroo?” asked Tony.

“Far, far away. From *you*.” Bucky patted Tony’s shoulder, walking from the room.

Tony looked back at Natasha and she just shrugged, mischievous as she is, smiling up at him. “He loves you, Tony. Do not worry.”

“I know.” He sat down next to the red-head, nudging at her leg to take her feet down. She did so, relaxing back. “I might go to the café today,” he said.

Natasha side-glanced him. “Are you now?”

“It’ll make Steve happy.”

Natasha eyes turned cloudy, a sense of distrust pooling her soul. “It’s hard to make Steve happy. I don’t think he can be happy nor sad.”

Before Tony could further question Natasha on what she possibly meant, Wanda took the perfect time to walk in, a tea in her small hands. She looked content, if not a bit ill from her stubborn cold that refused to go away.

“Found the thief, yet?” Her European accent was thick and musky, throat clogged and scratchy from her fever. “Surely the Tony Stark can find something as serious as this.”

“Very serious, Wanda. Sit down.” Natasha moved over so the girl could sit down. She did so, taking a sip of her tea. She was dressed in a cotton sweater and jogging bottoms, very un-Wanda of her. But even she chose comfort over style when sick.

“I’m gonna go to the café today and look at the security camera’s myself,” announced Tony.

“When are you to go?” asked Wanda.

Tony took this moment to look at his phone, the time reading 2:34 p.m. He had plenty of time to go down there before it shuts. Most shops around that area close around 5 to 6. He could simply fly there, but considering the other days events, he didn’t need to attract anymore attention.

“I can go now.” Tony stood up, finishing off the whiskey before wandering over to sink and placing the cup in there. “Tash, you with me?”

She nodded. “You’ll be okay, right, Wanda?”

Wanda made a face at her as if to imply she will be completely capable of taking care of herself. Natasha smiled lightly before following Tony from the living area and down towards the garage where his cars lay.

“Who are you hoping to catch, Tony?” Natasha said as she put the seat-belt across her chest and into the plug.

Tony only shrugged at her question, putting his car in drive and hearing from the building. It would take a good half an hour before they are there. Being upstate of New York had its pros and cons. It was much quieter, and the spacing provided isolation from the paparazzi and screaming fans. It was more appropriate, especially for someone as anxious as Tony. It also meant the place wasn’t as prone to getting attacked.

“The pad is really important to Steve, isn’t it?” Tony mumbled. He could sense the intense gaze Natasha was giving him; he carried on, “I've noticed that he’s ... not exactly concerned for the money. Although it is a lot of money is his eyes, or anyone else’s ... he seems more upset with the sketching pad; Tash, I didn’t even know he could draw.”

Natasha chuckled softly, pulling down the window and letting a light, bustling breeze in. It chopped at her short locks, the curls at the end framing her face. Tony always thought she was an incredibly beautiful woman, but she did scare him a bit.

“There is still a lot of things you don’t know about Steve, Tony,” she said lightly.

“What? That he’s taking it back-doors by Bucky?”

Natasha didn’t say anything other than a small noise emitting from her throat, as if she were deciding whether to laugh of grunt.

“He told me his sketch pad was stronger than a journal. At least, that’s what most artists think. These sketches, in that pad, golden-dead memories, something a journal simply cannot picture.”

Tony let himself glance at her before turning his eyes back to the road again. “Since when did you become so poetic, Romanoff? Your elegant ways are chasing me.”

“That’s always been the plan, Stark.”

The rest of the way was in a somewhat comfortable silence. Natasha was singing a soft lullaby to herself—one Tony has heard her sing to Bruce, Bucky and even Steve. It was sweet and low, her eyes staring boringly out of the window by the whizzing buildings that merged into one. Tony let his fingers drum lightly on the steering wheel until they finally parked near the café. Natasha gracefully stepped out first, her hair bouncing just above her shoulders. Tony then got out and the both walked together, ignoring the sudden stares and whispers if people that came near them. Tony can just see the headlines now: TONY STARK IS CHEATING ON PEPPER POTTS? Tony chuckled to himself at that, but then remembered the more serious situation; to make Steve smile again.

They approached the doors and stepped inside the warmth that hugged their shoulders. Tony was wearing simply a t-shirt with a stupid science pun on it with some trousers, maybe a bit little for New York's bitter wind. Natasha was wearing a plain sweatshirt and jeans, shielding her from the angry bites of the air. Inside was not as big as the outside. Tony sometimes wandered why Steve and Sam bothered coming here when there were other, many beautiful and café's around the city—even near the Avengers facility.

They both walked up to a counter where a petite teenage girl with long brown hair tied up in a ponytail stood. She had a warm smile, and upon seeing Iron Man and Black Widow in the presence of her, her soft, brown eyes lit up with more light. "Can I help you?"

These are the sort of people Tony appreciates. Her vice isn't fake, it's genuine. And she didn't so much as wet herself at the sight of the two in this small, lonesome café. Even Natasha dropped her serious façade and settled for a graceful smile.

"Is your manager around, dear?" asked Tony, setting his glasses aside to look around properly. He had almost forgot he was wearing them.

The girl nodded. "I'll just fetch her for you."

She went away. Natasha checked behind them just in case they were holding up anyone but no one else was around. There was a quiet hum around the area, old people chatting quietly and a few others with their laptops with a large cup of coffee to keep them from passing out. Typical university students ... Tony was one of them.

A good couple of minutes later, the girl came back with another woman in tow. She looked equally as friendly, maybe the same age as Tony.

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

Natasha took lead. "We were wondering if it were possible to look at your CCTV footage?" she said. The lady nodded, indicating her to go on. "We emailed, but we never got a reply. Our friends were here just yesterday and one of them lost his satchel here. It's likely it was stolen. Do you mind if we have a look?"

The lady nodded again. "The pleasure's all mine. Please come this way." She opened up the counter door, allowing them through. She threw a look over her shoulder at the girl. "Alice, do mind the till until I get back. Adrian should be back from break soon." The girl, Alice, nodded, waving at Natasha and Tony. They waved back and then followed the manager into the Staff's Only room.

Inside contained a few doors. She led them one with double doors and inside lay a few computers, one with the inside of the cafe, individual screens, the second, in the middle, the outside section and the last one is for the staff room area. The manager sat down, in the process, offering Tony and Natasha a seat too. They declined, preferring to peer over her shoulder and pointing out the movements that look most suspicious.

"Do you know what time your friends came here yesterday?" the manager asked.

Tony looked at Natasha for guidance and she spoke, "They were here late morning, I'm guessing."

The manager clicked on a few stuff and Tony pointed when a full screen and bad quality picture came up of both Steve and Sam. The angle was only facing Sam with Steve's back to the camera. The lady fast-forward the footage and then stopped.

"*There!*" Tony suddenly said, making both women in the room jump. "See that."

His finger hovered lightly over the screen. The paused image still took the still of Sam and Steve talking, but a figure loomed in the corner. He snapped his fingers to play again and the woman complied. She made sure to click a few times, an options bar coming up before playing it again. It played in slow motion, the quality burning Tony's eyes. He found the person to be quite sneaky, as if they knew where the CCTV camera's were, because they kept their face well hidden. He had on a black hoodie with equally as dark jeans. The stature of this person was unclear, but the skin and bones was obvious. This person looked half-starved. But he was swift; with one quick motion, the satchel vanished from Steve's seat. It didn't even look as if the person had it. Whoever this was, they were agile and had skills only an out-of-town town thug would achieve.

"Is there any other angles? So we can see who this person is?" Natasha leaned over, eyebrows drawn into a frown.

The manager, still quiet and obeying, went onto a few more tabs and up came another angle. This time, it was one with the profile's of Sam and Steve. The clip played again. Even if this angle would have shown a much greater angle to the thief, he was clever enough to keep his head down. Tony, however, did not miss the light, brown curls that were sticking out from the the dark clothing.

"He's got curly hair and he's a skinny runt," grumbled Tony. "He's small, I'll give you that."

"Easy for thieving," finished Natasha, knowing what Tony was implying.

Tony nodded, pursing his lips together. "Thank you for showing this to us."

The manager clicked off the shows and placed it back with the normal CCTV security footage. She smiled up at them, moving herself from her seat. "That's okay. And I'm sorry for what happened. I

do hope you find his satchel soon."

She led them back out, and the girl, Alice, at the counter waved at them again for a small goodbye. They did they same, walking from the café; not before Tony grabbed himself a takeaway coffee.

"Thank you for offering me one, Stark," Natasha said once they hopped back into the car.

Tony, about to put on his seat-belt, stole a glance from her. "You want one?" he deadpanned.

Natasha playfully rolled her eyes and sighed, defeated. "What else can we do but wait?" she said.

Tony placed his coffee down, taking the steering wheel again and setting his car into drive. "That's all we can do. In the meantime, shall we pick up a new sketching pad for our old man?"

"He's younger than us."

"*Pfft*."

The air around them back at the building seemed thick with tension. Both arriving back from their small trip, F.R.I.D.A.Y. informed them that Sam would like to see them immediately. This was strange, because it was always Tony who needed to meet with someone among the team. They followed their feet on autopilot to the main living area. Sam was there with Steve and Vision.

"Where were you two?" the man asked, arms crossed over his chest.

"Looking for that thief, the one who stole Steve's satchel," replied Natasha. Deciding she would like to kick her feet up, she sat down on the sofa, sinking into the plush cushions.

"Right, we located him," said Sam.

Tony wanted to wipe that smirk off of his face. He looked so smug about being a 'greater' friend to Steve for locating the thief. "How the hell did you manage that?"

"Vision has his ways."

Natasha cast a look towards Steve who smiled gently. Tony was surprised to see him looking quite well and jovial; that was the act of finding the thief. A chain of events was starting and Tony didn't like it. Questions became puzzles in his head; what if they couldn't find the thief? Would Steve be sad forever? —the hope that lightened his heart gradually fading away bit by bit? No. Tony would firmly put his foot down and ruthlessly explain to Steve that he just needs to grow up; it's only a sketch book. And so be it Bucky nearly beats the crap out of him for hurting the blonde. But more questions hazed his mind. If they do find the person, what will be to it? Take it back and give the thief mercy? They would have to do something. Make him hurt just as much as he made Steve.

All of this over a stupid art book.

"Sir, I have located him in the downside of New York."

"Great." Tony threw his hands in the air dramatically. "So Romanoff and I wasted our glorious time in finding this asshole to come home and find Birdy used a more tactical way of making Steve happy."

"Was that an insult?" said Steve.

"My God, you actually have a voice. How about a thank you, to Tash and I for at least trying."

"Tony..." sighed Natasha.

Steve frowned. "Right." He turned to Natasha. "Thank you, Natasha. And thanks Tony. We should have called."

"To right, you should of." Tony finished off the coffee he then remembered he had and threw it into the rubbish bin. "So, Vis, am I right in thinking he's where the homeless population are? Because I was actually near that two days ago."

"When the paparazzi attacked?" said Steve.

Tony leaned over the sofa, Steve's blond hairs ticking his face. He moved away, instead, putting his arm over the man's head. "Rightfully so, yes. As you had wilfully let me out the house when I told you time and time again I am not an outside person."

Steve shook his arm off. "If you're going to be mean to me then stop using me as your armrest."

"Awe, Steve..." Natasha pouted at him. She then reached up and ruffled his hair, which is in need of a good cut. "Your luscious long locks are kinda growing on me."

"Give it a few months he'll be as handsome as Thor," said Sam.

Vision chose that time to interrupt them, becoming irritant that none of them are taking this seriously. "If I may speak, this thief I have come across appears to only be a boy."

"Tony's a boy," said Natasha.

"How *dare* you!"

"Fine," said Vision. "This boy is only a teenager, I'd say."

"A homeless teen?" There was a short pause. "It's not often you find children doing stuff so criminal when that young. They get into the bad stuff when they blossom into adult hood."

"This isn't a *joke*, Tony," snapped Steve. His eyes lowered and a certain—*different*—cloud crossed the haze that stood behind the blue. "If he's just a kid then I can't stay mad at him."

"That isn't the point, Steve." Sam took a seat, leaning forwards with his hands resting together, ringing his fingers between each-other in concentration. "Stealing is a crime, no matter what your age. You can't pity him; he's been raised to do this—a human being can decide who they are. That kid chose the dark side, and he must realise the statistics."

Dead silence filled the room. It hung heavy over Tony's shoulder's. It felt like a heavy elephant had landed itself for him to carry. He hadn't realised the crime of this circumstance. They were so worried for their Captain retrieving into his shell that they cast a blind eye to the fact that this whole thing *is* a crime. Something they can easily take to the police. Only if Steve really wanted to.

"Time is ticking. Should we go to the police?"

They all looked at Natasha and she raised her hands in defence.

Steve shook his head. "It's a sketch book." He stood, dusting himself off. "I need to get over it." Then, he was gone, whisked from the room, leaving behind a various mixture of emotions between the last four.

"He also had a picture of Peggy in there," mumbled Sam before he followed Steve out.

Tony swallowed, uncomfortable at the given hand. By no means was he going to go behind Steve's back and go to the police. Although it will be much easier for them to handle it, Tony couldn't do that. So he will have to go there by himself. At his own made-up mind, he walks from the room, ignoring the looks he got from Vision and Natasha. The fact that they might be dealing with a kid only reminded him of the one he had helped out only a couple of days ago. And a silent, dejected part of him wishes that kid be safe. And has no involvement with the assertive, rancorous outside world of reality to survive.

Chapter End Notes

first of all, i would like to apologise for the late update xD i am gonna be uploading every wednesday, but sometimes it can be late. i had work yesterday and today, and it's been a busy week. for the late update, i shall have another chapter up this weekend!!

thank you to all the comments in the last chapter! you're all absolute gems, making my day even greater! <33!!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was a long morning to say the least. Peter knew, that once he got back to the others, there would be trouble to endure. Throughout the morning he scavenged for a lot of water for the kids and even a few bites to eat. He even tried his best to get a few stuff for the others as well, but he guess he shouldn't try as much. He didn't show up yesterday, so God only knows what today will encounter.

He let his head hang low. Gathering up enough courage (which wasn't much at all), he let his feet drag him towards the tunnel. First of all, he would have to appreciate the ball of fury that is Emily. When he turned to her side, he was surprised that only she was occupying hers and the kids space.

"Hey, Emily," he said quietly. She didn't look happy at all. Her dull eyes stormed as he came closer. He leaned down to her height, sitting on his calf's and shrugging off his rucksack. It was a different one; one that he had stolen a year ago to carry thieved snacks and drinks for the kids.

"What do you have to say for yourself, mister?" she deadpanned. "I have the kids running around trying to find a way to survive!"

Peter flinched, swallowing the lump in his throat. It hurt—*it hurts* when he fails someone like Emily. Others may believe her to be a little arrogant, and perhaps a bit bratty, but all she wants is to protect her family; the only family she has left. Without Peter, she would have to take care of the other kids all by herself, and a nine-year-old cannot do something like that by herself.

"I'm sorry, Emily—"

"Sorry is not enough, Peter..." The worst thing above all else, she sounded so *gutted*. Peter has betrayed her, hasn't he? "We went to bed without lunch and dinner."

Peter unzipped his rucksack and pulled out packs of twinkies and a huge cereal pack of lucky charms. Lucky charms used to be his favourite snack as a kid (who cares if it's cereal?) and he managed to smuggle a load of mini packets from various types of shops as to not raise suspicion.

Emily snatched it from him before he could even begin to beckon the prize. A low huff sounded from her as she set them aside, not at all thanking him for the trouble. Then again, he didn't deserve even the hint of a child's sweet smile. Not from Emily.

"I'm really sorry, Emily," Peter said after Emily had taken all of the food and water, barley leaving enough for the others. "After my venture, I-I got caught up, something happened—"

"I don't care." Emily stomped her foot on the hard ground. She reached up and gripped his scrawny shoulders shielded by the fabric of his hoodie. Blunt nails dug deeper, as if she were trying to cause him physical pain like he had caused them mentally. "Peter, I don't *care*. We *need* you. What can I do without you?" There was a crack in her voice. Peter could help but pull her into a tight embrace. This was mainly because he wanted to hide the tears that were beginning to cloud his vision. Emily needn't see that.

"I-It won't happen again, Em..." His voice came out in a whisper, his groggy voice barley passing his cracked lips. "I promise."

Her voice was ice-cold, but Peter heard the frightened little child she still was in there. “You promised us water yesterday,” she croaked. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

They stayed like that for a few more seconds, soaking in the souls of one another before they parted. Emily had tears rolling down her cheeks. The lump in Peter’s throat threatened to force a cry out, but not in front of this little girl. He couldn’t. And he won’t.

He reached forwards and delicately wipes away the tears that gradually fell from her eyes. “Don’t cry, okay? I’ll get us outta this.”

“We need you, Peter. Don’t disappoint us again.”

After a brief pause of staring at Emily, he got up, and with one last small smile, walked away, ready (or not so ready) to confront his friends.

Not many people reside the tunnels today and he thanked the above for the convenience. It was a good everyday he would at least get roughed up once before he made it to the end of the tunnel. He doesn’t need that on his conscience today.

Sat in a small circle were Carter, Dorian and Jordan. Wherever Aaliyah and Connor were, Peter didn’t very much care. Either they were banging each-other, drugs or thieving ... Peter inwardly shuddered.

At the sound of Peter’s subtle footsteps, Jordan was the first to turn. His gaze didn’t spark danger from what Peter had expected. In fact, a smirk played on his lips and he jumped up, puffing out his chest.

“Ah! Pete, knew you’d come back alive!” He outstretched his hand towards Dorian who grumbled something, red eyes disorientated from his whereabouts and handed Jordan what looked like a five dollar note. Peter raised an eyebrow at this. Jordan only chuckled and gestures for the boy to sit down. Peter awkwardly squeezed between Dorian and Jordan when the young man sat down. His long legs crossed pushed against Peter’s much shorter ones, crushing him a bit. “We just had a silly bet, ya’ know? After all, that Sam Wilson is a bitta’ work, even when he’s plain old ‘Sam Wilson’. Ya’ get what I’m saying, Peter?”

Peter pretended not to notice the death glares he was receiving from Carter and Dorian. Even in his weed-induced mind, Dorian couldn’t help but give off a ghostly lour.

“What have ya’ got us, then?”

Peter was quick to tighten his fingers around his rucksack before unzipping it and drawing out the wallet he had from Steve Rogers. The rest of the man’s things were hidden away with his other rucksack that contained his crappy Spider-Man costume.

With one swift move, Jordan seized the wallet from Peter’s bruised fingers and pulled out the ten and twenty. Almost mockingly, he held the pieces of crumpled paper up to the little light provided in the tunnel, a thoughtful pose on. Something old men do when seeing if the money is real or not. It must have been real because he dropped them which Carter clambered to clutch at his chest.

“Is that all?” said Jordan, looking expectedly at Peter. Then the man shrugged, biting at his pale lips. “Shoulda’ known the Captain would carry less. I mean,” he snorted, laughing and looking up at the dank ceiling. Peter isn’t sure whether he wants to cry or scream. “That blaring tosser grew up when food was scarce and water was dirty. He should know ‘ow we feel.”

“He was never *homeless*, Jordy,” mumbled Dorian. He was reaching into his pocket to pull out a

normal cigarette rather than the normal joints he had on him. This normally means he's stoned beyond belief for him to switch to a normal smoker. "He would never know how we feel."

"Dory is right." Carter had stuffed the dollar bills into his jean pocket. Peter can only imagine now what that money is going to be wasted on; certainly not good nor water like he would use it for.

"Don't fuckin' call me that," snapped Dorian.

An uncomfortable feeling set inside of Peter. His senses were tingling. Whether it was the sudden brightness that cast shadows among them or the fact he could feel Jordan burning holes into his mind, he didn't know; all he knew was that he had to get out of there before he passed out.

With difficulty, he got up on wobbly legs. He accidentally disturbed Dorian in the middle of lighting the cancerous stick that brought him harmony. It caused Dorian to crack again and sit up, pushing Peter to the ground with a forceful blow. His face connected to the damp concrete, only managing to scratch up a bit of his face. No matter how little the cuts where, they still hurt. Just like little words still hurt.

Once again, he tried to get up, and this time, he got away.

Jordan had figured out a good few month into joining their gang that Peter couldn't stand too much noise or too much of a naked eye, to put it bluntly. He never once figured out why.

"Fuckin' pussy."

Peter had made it outside into the cool, bitter wind. He had his rucksack slinging off one shoulder, still open but with nothing else but another hoodie inside. The wallet still occupied Carter as well as the money.

Jordan stood next to him. He was a good head and a half taller than Peter. The boy has always been short, but Jordan just took the piss. He was incredibly tall. And it made Peter feel insecure, if not, a bit vulnerable. Although he knew he could easily take Jordan out (depending whether he has had a good few days of food and drink) he could never show that. To them, Peter was some washed-up kid who ran away from home. No way was Peter about to tell them the real reason he came to live on the streets. All they know is his first name, and Peter will gladly stick to that only.

On the inside, spider DNA pulses through his veins and drinks at his insides. He needs more nutrients than any other teenage boy because he becomes weak too easily. The first few months with little food took a tool on him, and he had to take a break from stopping threats that rattled New York, but most importantly, Queens within New York.

However, because he's become so used to this punishment of his crimes, he no longer feels so weak; even after a couple of days with no ounce of food to satisfy the mourning hole that corrupted his stomach. Water is much easier to find and steal, so he never let himself worry that much for it. Only sometimes does he have to go without.

He's survived a good day and a half now with no food and water so he could bring it to the kids. Honestly, it makes him feel so much lighter knowing the kids won't go hungry; the fact that they now have water to quench their thirst almost made a complacent in his heart.

Now his overloaded senses were taking weights on his hazy mind. He felt drugged, or rather, he felt drunk. It was ridiculous; he had survived more days than this without any food. Then again, he's always had at least a bottle-full of water a day. This is different. He also promised himself to go patrolling tonight. Nothing was looking good at the moment.

“You gotta swear to get to Sam, okay, Peter?”

Jordan’s husky voice snapped him from his feverish state. He nodded, not bothering to look at the man. Jordan patted his shoulder, giving him a light shove before entering the tunnel.

That is Peter’s queue to exit his light conversation and for him to enter the new problems in mind.

Sam was not going to consider going out today. Not after his friend ‘lost’ his satchel. He would have to make do and find someone else to bother.

Carefully, he jogged a little down the alley way before taking a huge jump and pressing his hands and feet to the wall. Of course his shoes have no way of sticking to the wall, so it had at first been a struggle to lift himself up. So much so that he could never fully make it to the top of his location. It felt like the first time, with his feet slipping, trainers not getting a tight enough grip on the wall. Even his hands were turning a phantom white at how how his palms were pressing into the rickety, old bricks.

“*C’mon, Peter...*” he hissed to himself. Straining his muscles, he managed to pull himself further. His shoe scraped a blind spot and he nearly slipped, his fingers burning against the rough surface of the brick. He could feel his fingertips throbbing in protest. He still pushed himself, and finally, with much panting, he made it to the top.

He had placed his things nearer to the tunnel so he didn’t have to make the long journey. Though it may come across as a bad idea, Peter knows his webs are stronger than any other normal spiders. It’s almost impossible to rip them apart without something such as a knife or incredibly razor sharp scissors.

Inside the mass of webs was not only his other rucksack, but Steve Rogers’ vintage satchel as well. He made sure to keep the guy’s card, picture of the pretty lady and sketch book in there. They only needed the money. Now all Peter has to do is hack into Steve’s bank account and he’s all set.

The closest deal he has is the library.

He ripped through the spider webs and got out Steve’s card. He then saddled the bags up again before walking along the rooftops and pushing himself towards the direction of the library. He always went there when he needed some alone time. The closest he ever comes to being happy.

The librarian, Mrs. Norris, a typically old lady, was surprisingly sweet. She didn’t care much for noise mainly because she was partly deaf. Every time Peter made an appearance she offered him some tea and biscuits, which he narcissistically accepted with great pleasure. Sometimes he would sneak a few biscuits to take to the kids. He had a feeling the old lady knew he was somewhat without parental guidance, given the the dirt and grease he was constantly covered in from living on the streets. She never once said anything, hence why she always let him stay in here longer than most. A few times he even crashed on the sofa's in the staff's area which are the best places for him to sleep since leaving home.

As he walked in, he found her in her normal space; glasses half way down her nose, flipping through a few papers and occasionally typing something on the computer. He approached her.

She looked up and a huge smile crossed her face. She raised her hand in greeting, a little sign of ‘Hello’ passing her palm. Peter greeted her back, a small blush covering his face from the warmth inside in comparison to the cold.

“Can I do anything for you, sweetheart?” Her voice was soft and gentle. It reminded Peter of his

beloved Aunt May. This was one of the first reasons why Peter took an instant liking to this old lady. She always had to speak up as she couldn't hear herself talk a lot.

Peter always chose to sign to her with what little sign language he knew. Carefully, he asked, *'Can I use the computer?'*

She nodded, putting a thumbs up for him. She gestured to the tea and biscuits, asking if he wanted some. Declining for the guilt, he set off to the computers.

There was a row of them along the windows. Only a couple of other people were occupying them. He was lucky enough to grab one at the end.

He set his stuff upon the ground but not before taking out Steve Rogers card. It's set numbers were on there and when he turned it around, he found his signature. Peter placed it down and got logged on. It would be a rather long day if he was to do this. It has been a good few months since he last hacked into someone else's bank account. All he needed was time and patience, but his concentration is waring thin. The fingers he placed upon the mouse were unstable, shaky—they lacked control. It frightened him. Especially when he looked back at the screen to see it fuzzy and doubling among his eyes.

With a brisk shake (which somewhat made this dizziness worse) he focused his eyes back on the screen. It doubled again before retreating back to normal.

Finding Steve's bank was the easy part, at it said the bank on his card. It was the security coding's and passwords that bothered Peter. His brain didn't seem to want to function at the moment as it is, so the time that ticked on in the corner of his eyes seemed to take hours and hours.

Only when he finally managed to break the code and hack into his account did Peter then realise it took a good half an hour to do so. Quite long—longer than it normally should have taken him, but good enough.

It showed him minor details, as in how much money Steve Rogers had in his bank. He had some money to spare, a good grand in there. To Peter that is a luxurious amount; he's hit a jackpot. He can't just draw it all out. The most he could is a couple hundred, which is a mind field. Peter could buy a weeks worth of food with that. He just needed to find some way to grab the pin number.

He clicked on a few things, going between account details, looking at sort codes as such. It was all a big mess. Peter has never had a bank account; looking and hacking at all the different parts of an incredibly secured bank account is causing his hands to shake from the amount of times he's had to reload the page and start again.

The only thing that kept him going was the thought of the kids going to bed with full belly's. He could even pick up a few soft blankets with this money so they finally went to sleep semi-warm and comfortable.

Peter had never stuck around bedtime, mainly because he never wanted to see the kids try their best to rely on the concrete to get into a comfortable position to sleep. Maybe they couldn't sleep. Some may suffer from nightmares; Emily bluntly told him that both Thomas and Millicent suffered from their dreams. They ran away from homes that hurt them. Their dreams taunt them and consumed their mind until they woke up crying. It was exhausting for them and all Peter needed to do was try harder.

"What the hell..." he mumbled to himself. With a frustrated sigh, he let his head fall into his hand, running them clean through his overly unruly locks. He cringed at the smooth, greasy sensation

slipping passed his fingers and took them out, his eyes boring into the brightly-lit screen.

It has now been a good hour now and he's still struggling for the pin number. He easily sought the sort code and account number. He even managed to find the security key.

Peter is starting to guess that they don't display the pin number on the account itself. This is because something such as a person hacking in and stealing the money the other has earned.

Under his gaze, he could see the tremble his hands have out on the mouse. He then realised his hands were a great shade of white, fading into the pale wall before him. He felt dizzy and sick. This only pushed him more; if he were to quite now, then these last couple of hours would of been wasted. He's not bling to let that happen.

He clicked on a few more stuff before heading over to the sort code and bank number again. He typed a few things on the computer, clicking the left mouse, moved it a bit ... his eyes squinting at the screen and his senses were screaming in protest to have a break, rest his eyes. But he was so nearly there! He can do this!

A page came up before his eyes, scanning and then rapidly printed a load of texts before him. He quickly clicked a few more times before he caught a rarity he thought he may never be able to find.

Pin code//: 0996

Finally—*oh so so finally*—Peter has found it.

Feeling like the elephant from his chest has been lifted, he easily memorised the pin, logged off and shot out the door, rucksack barley clinging to his shoulders.

The nearest bank for drawing out money was only across the street. No one was there and as soon as he made it, he shoved the card into the feeding machine, waited for the pin code, typed, and *well-ah!*

On display showed the many options of 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50. Peter clicked the fifty and was soon greeted with two 20's and a 10.

Heart lifted, he pulled the card out, and ran for it. This was his chance to by a few decent foods for the kids. With this purity, he could buy them each a fizzy drink, something they will *love!*

That's when he heard it; the sound of a machine of some sort. It sounded almost like a plane flying right over his head. But a plane shouldn't be this high.

A swift glance up told Peter it wasn't a plane. More along the lines of it was a man; a suit; red and yellow, the frown upon its face-plate familiar in Peter's eyes.

His stomach dropped. And he paled, the notes in one hand crushing under his intense, forceful grip and card almost being snapped in half.

It was indeed Iron Man; *The* Iron Man. The one who protected and carried Mr. Tony Stark in the heat of a fight or flight. And he was looking at Peter, the face-plate sending shivers to course through Peter's spine. The voice that came out was distant, cold, and above all, *angry.*

"That doesn't belong to you."

Chapter End Notes

aye! finally! i suck at uploading schedule's as you can tell. next update will be really early tomorrow morning right before i fly off to america!!!

also, finally saw ant-man and the wasp. ahh, so good!

thank you for all the comments. such gems, all of you. kudos to all!! <3

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> whilst writing, i always listen to music and run boy run by woodkid came on; it fits quite well with this chapter i think.
>
> hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This kid ... the hair, stature, features ... he's familiar to Tony. He just couldn't place his finger on it. The method was enough to distract him, because the boy looking up at him was crushing stolen money and ready to snap that damn card in half.

He was homeless, there was nothing else to it. From his jagged jeans to his torn hoodie, the boy needed the sun and a sandwich, to say the least. And Tony couldn't help but feel a pit in the middle of his chest at that look.

The kid had huge, doe-brown eyes. They were scared, a panicked look blinking in the distance. Tony almost caved at the mere sight. He looked so helpless, almost a pleading cry torn from him to Tony.

But then, he was running. He sped off down the road and Tony sighed angrily, putting himself back into his own authoritative skin and pushed himself after the kid.

"I got eyes on him," announced Tony through his comm. "Through Three Bridges Way, heading down and through the alley. You with me, Romanoff?"

"*Following ahead, Stark,*" returned Natasha.

Tony saw her small figure jump from a car nearby before she was dashing off down the alley the kid had run off to. Tony took to a higher height, letting his eyes fall easily on the figures of both Natasha and the boy.

"*How far, Stark?*" asked Natasha.

"He had a good start." There was a pause. "A good dozen metres. The curves in this alley are all over the place—be careful, Nat; this kid is fast."

"*Don't worry, Stark.*" Her tone was good natured just as Tony saw her swerve from a tight corner and full on spring again.

"Falcon, I need you in the sky, keep an eye on this kid." Tony boosted his resilience and shot off, nearing to the end of the alley.

"*On it,*" Sam's reply came through. Tony saw in the distance the man coming his way and they both side flew from each-other, Tony heading down at half asked speed.

Wanda was also there at the end, hands at the ready. Tony landed next to her, his hands now coming up. They waited for Natasha and Sam to give a signal. Anxiously, Tony thought about the

money the kid had stolen. Once they caught the boy, he would give him a load of money himself to get him off their backs. Or specifically, Steve's back.

"*Shit—*"

"*What the—!?*"

"Wilson, Romanoff?" Tony called. Wanda let her hands down, eyes going back to their usual green colour. Her posture was slightly slumped and movements sluggish from her little fever that was gradually recovering. They had told her to wait at home but she argued that it would be easier to catch this punk when she could easily block him or even stop him with her crazy magic.

"*The kid's gone!*" Sam exclaimed, confusion dripping from each-word.

Natasha felt the same by the way she cried, "*What the hell?*" She then came running from the alley, skidding to a halt. "*Falcon, what did you see?*"

Sam, still in the sky and preferring to hover there until he safely landed on top of a small, crushed roof, he spoke. "*The little bastard climbed the wall of the building, near the end.*"

"*Climbed?*" Tony repeated. The head of the Iron Man suit came off so he could breathe better. How was it possible for this kid to climb a wall?

Wanda conveyed his thoughts. "Are you sure, Sam? Did he just jump the fence—"

"*I swear,*" Sam said firmly. "*I know what I saw. His shoes must have a* hell *of a grip.*"

"This isn't a joke," said Wanda. "Vision, eyes on the sky." She placed her hand to her ear-piece, looking above her. Beside Sam, Vision appeared, cape flowing behind him as the winds turned.

"*I have caught his track.*" Vision flew down, floating above the top of the alley. "*He appears to of climbed to wall, just as Wilson has stated. Other than that, I cannot get a reading. It is almost as if he has disappeared into thin air.*"

"That's impossible, Vision..." Tony groaned. This kid was fast. Faster than any other normal kid. And he somehow has the ability to climb walls. This is uncanny, even for Tony. He tried piecing this together, but his mind wouldn't grip what he was hearing. "We can't give up. We have got a very unhappy Captain back at the compound."

"He should be here, with us," said Natasha. She ripped off something from her wrist, clearly frustrated. She was gladly trying to help, but their Captain was ordered by not only Bucky, but by Sam to stay as well. He wanted to come for the kid; after all, it is his things and his money being taken as of now. (Which leaves Tony's question as to how the kid managed to hack into Steve's bank account). But with Steve in his own depressive state, he can't fight well. Definitely not against a homeless kid who seems to have intelligence beyond anyone's eyes.

"*He needs to stay out of this and let us deal with it,*" said Sam. "*C'mon—we know what wall he went up, let's go.*"

Together, they formed around said building the kid so much as 'crawled' up. The roof of it was empty, void of anyone or anything. The only thing that stood out was a clump in the corner of what looked like a sticky, white substance. Rather, when Tony approached, was stuck with webs; webs strong enough that not even the human hand could tear apart.

"Are there spiders here that we aren't aware of?" asked Sam. "What produced that?"

“There’s something stuck under it,” said Natasha. “Wanda, Vision, think you can break it?”

Before Wanda could even think to lift her hands, webs, from seemingly nowhere, shot past their vision and concealed her hands. She dropped to her knees. Vision flew over, ready to release her when more webs flung their way over, catching Vision and restraining him. Tony made the stupid mistake of looking their way instead of focusing on a haze passing his gaze and when he turned back to the webbed items, they were gone.

“Sam?”

“*Spider-Man.*”

With his wings spread, he set off, going in the opposite direction of where they were headed. Only then did Tony catch sight of a hooded figure, barley noticeable, grab hold of a branch and swing his way around the edges of the woods they were near.

“Falcon?” Natasha started following after him. Vision blasted the stiff and thick webs from him and Wanda, managing to free them both. He gently helped her up before flying away after Sam. Wanda and Tony were right behind Natasha. “You got eyes on the prize?”

“*Not yet, Widow,*” Sam grunted through their comm.

“Vision, can you get a reading?” Tony dodged a pole before ascending into the woods, helmet now on and flying, Natasha and Wanda still close on his tail. The trees were completely overgrown in these parts. Tony had a fun time trying to dodge them.

Before they entered the adventure of finding the thief, they set out a work plan.

Both Flacon and Vision would work in sky’s. Vision would use his tracker devises to locate the boy and point to Sam where he is. Sam can easily stop him from the sky with his flight and speed. Tony goes for the medium, as he is now, trying to avoid every tree that enjoyed smacking him on all bits of his suit. Lastly, Black Widow and Scarlet Witch will maintain the ground level, ready to corner the young street urchin.

“*I got eyes, Falcon,*” Vision said.

“*Where?*”

“*Corner from that tree. It appears the boy is running but slowing down.*”

“*You on that, Stark?*” Sam comm scratched and he was back again, seating under his breath. His wing set must have scraped a tree somehow.

Tony boosted his thrust capacities, still avoiding trees like the plague. “I’m on it, Sam.” In his line of sight, the mass blur of green and trunks left his side and in cane the pointed spots of a persons outline. The black hooded figure ducked behind something. For a moment, Tony believed he had once again let the boy so easily slip between his fingers before he popped up again. “Sneaky little bastard.”

Black Widow passed him in a flash, Wanda’s scarlet magic lifting her up and beyond. She strikes past a tree, landing on the ground in front of Tony before zooming off again.

It was only a matter of time before they lost the bugger again. Wanda was falling behind. Though she may be fast, Tony’s suit and Natasha’s natural ability to speed through most things took their advantage and threw a con Wanda’s way.

“Wanda, grab on!” Tony said, scowling down so he was just in front of the girl. She nodded at him when he faced her, encouraging her to jump. With one giant leap, she put her left arm around the suit’s back, hand gripping the sides just under his arms. Her left leg was digging into his suit as the other lay out. Her right hand was glowing, moving unwanted branches and tall trees away as they shot passed each and every one of them with ease.

Soon, they caught up to Natasha, her skills blending with Wanda’s ways of keeping the neglected, overgrown trees out of the way.

“How far, Vision?” asked Tony.

“*You’re nearly there, Stark. A dozen more metres.*” Sam answered instead.

A few more boosts and finally, Tony sought out the hooded figure. Wanda jumped from Tony and stood rigid, her hands flying in front of her face. Tony saw the light red force field blocking the boy’s way. Before the boy could think about turning away, Natasha jumped in, going to the right. When he turned left, both Vision and Sam swooped in, locking eyes on the thief.

“We’ve got you now, kid. Give it up.” Tony lowered himself to the ground. He didn’t remove the helmet just in case the kid ran again.

The boy didn’t look scared. Moreover, he didn’t look defeated. Thus, shocking all of them, he broke from their locks and managed to avoid the hot Natasha was about to send his way. He slipped between her stunts and dodged and ducked from the trees Wanda forcefully crashed around him.

“Son of a *bitch!*” shouted Sam. He took off again, obviously determined to pin this devil to the ground.

Tony never knew a kid could be this skilled in combat. With a hefty sigh, he once again gave Wanda a lift and a boost for Natasha before they were once again driving themselves insane through the woods.

They followed Vision’s and Sam’s lines of defence and locations. Soon, it led them to the ends of the woods. In front of them they were presented with a huge, darkened tunnel. The lights around it showed a hell’s gateway to Satan and Tony wasn’t sure whether he was comfortable with sending his team through.

“Why are we stopping?” asked Sam as he once again landed. Vision swiftly held his position in the air, just low enough for them to embark on his presence. “It’s just a tunnel.”

Tony side-glanced the man. “Did he make it in there?” When the others raised their eyebrows or have him a questioning look as to what he meant, he continued. “I mean, would a kid as small as him enter the big, bad, dark tunnel?”

“You saw him, Stark.” Natasha shrugged at his rhetorical question. “He passed me in the blink of an eye. Anyone to do much as touch him he will freak out. He’s obviously taking these enhanced skills from somewhere. I doubt a murky tunnel is here to effect him in anyway.”

“What’s wrong, Tony? Scared of a little dark?” Wanda crossed her arms over her chest. To Tony, looking positively adorable with her short stature. But he sighed, rolling his eyes at their mocking gazes. Even Vision—the traitor—managed a small smile behind his serious attitude of battle.

Tony shook his head at the false assumption. “No, just worried we may encounter a few more like that kid back there. Which reminds me” —he thrust himself upwards again, matching Vision’s

height. “Where did Spider-Man go? Sam, you said you saw him.”

Sam made a face at him. Something unreadable. “I never said I saw him. I just said his name. Where else do you think those webs came from? Does it look like some giant spider may be crawling around here? No.”

Tony put his hands up in defence, the picture quite comical as he was in his Iron Man suit. “Alright, Big Bird, tame your wings.”

“I don’t understand why Spider-Man would web us, though.”

Tony looked at Wanda thoughtfully. The crime-fighting spider was surly on their side, right? It didn’t make much sense. A whirlwind of questions were beginning to secular themselves like a rumbling volcano ready to explode inside of Tony’s head. What has happened? These chains of events were starting to not only get on his nerves, but exhaust him.

Spider-Man has been around for a good couple of years now. He wore what looks to be a pair of blue jogging bottoms and a red hoodie. Tony isn’t sure where the webs are exactly coming from, or how he climbs walls as such—they do not obey the laws of Physics at all. Then again, neither does Steve’s shield; the point is, Tony and Bruce have done many researches of Spider-Man. Purely out of interest and some on experimentation.

There was no way they could get in contact with this guy. He seemed to never want to be found. And the question unanswered as of now is frustrating; if Spider-Man really did web Wanda and Vision up from owing up ‘his’ webs, what was he hiding? Or why was Spider-Man potentially helping out this thief? They had to be somehow connected.

Joining the dots at this point would only make the ache in Tony’s head worse. The one thing they should be focusing on right now is this little bastard who keeps running right under their noses with no one noticing the crimes he is committing.

Natasha spoke up for Tony. “There’s no time to discus this. He went through that tunnel, we’re going through that tunnel. We’ve been through HYDRA bases before, why is this any different?”

“She has a point,” said Vision.

“C’mon, pussy-willows, lets go,” said Tony.

They entered the tunnel. No light seemed to be shining at the end. Wanda made a point in using her magic as a source of light. Grounds of water and filth scattered the walls, rust and bacteria of all sorts brushing each surface. Tony suddenly became glad that Natasha nor Wanda, or anyone on his team for that matter were shy of any grime. This would be a huge problem. Tony could not even begin to imagine what the smell was like.

“Where the hell could he have gone?” muttered Sam, the anger crawling up his skin. “I’ve got a few tricks in mind I wouldn’t mind showing to that kid.”

“I tell you, he’s got nerve,” said Natasha. Her head was looking side to side for any budding attacks. All seems clear for now.

“If I may say, the child seems to be outrunning us all,” commented Vision. “We are becoming deficient to our fighting skills. Perhaps you should practise more, Mr. Stark.”

“Thank you,” said Tony, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“It is my nature to tell the truth.”

“We can hear that,” said Sam.

They continued on until they managed to make it to the end of the tunnel. All stopped. Tony could almost feel each vibration of vexation coming from his team mates. Even Vision was showing signs of annoyance.

“How can we of lost a kid so easily?” demanded Sam to no one in particular.

All was quiet for the moment before they heard the tapping of someone’s shoes. Each whizzed round, Wanda firing her dusts of glow through the tunnel only to spot feet dangling at the end at the top, disappearing into thin air.

“Did that kid just climb the fucking wall again?” growled Sam.

He didn’t wait anyone to reply to him; he and Vision flew off, Tony giving not only a lift to Wanda but Natasha this time, gliding them from the dark abyss of the tunnel. He dropped them at the top of the tunnel which lay morning dew, overgrown green grass. (Tony had no idea there was so much green in New York).

For the umteempth time that day, they sought out the fight and flight battle.

It was so laughable. In a few years time, Tony knows the five of them will be out-right cackling about this. How they couldn’t catch a goddamn kid that could apparently climb walls and had a possible link to Spider-Man. The climbing walls had to have something to do with Spider-Man; the guy was maybe helping the kid? Or the boy had some sort of intellect with how Spider-Man climbs walls; thus, using that to his advantage and taking it into his hands by thieving for other people’s things.

Now Tony made his way up high, himself becoming frustrated. Profanities we’re bubbling themselves up within his throat, ready to scream and shout. Never has he felt so embittered by a fight. Some were incredibly disheartening, each mission thwart with at least one life lost.

However, those expeditions were ruled by scientists creatures, robotic creatures of adults to say the least. Never had one been reigned by a child; a child *so* small.

Tony was too proud to admit that the reason why his rages were among this thug was because he was a kid. A kid was—as Vision had stated—outrunning them. Every time they came so close, he easily cast himself away to the shadows, popping out beneath them and no matter how hard you try to chase him, it was impossible. They couldn’t even so much as injure him.

“*Falcon!*” Natasha yelled.

“*He’s there! I see him!*”

Tony’s nostrils flared as his suit sped up. “Time to get this son of a bitch.”

Him, Sam and Vision took to the air, swerving in and out of each other, taking their extra and careful shots. Somehow, each one missed. It was as if the kid could sense where the shot was headed because he managed to dodge each and every one of them. For each fire for each dash, the kid was a hell of a sprint and a pain in the ass for that matter.

“*He’s slowing down,*” declares Wanda. “*We have to get him somehow trapped again.*”

"*Yes, because that worked out so well last time, didn't it?*" groused Sam.

"Look on the bright side, this makes us better prepared for next time," said Tony, firing another beam of light. It cut a tree, just missing the kid by an inch. Tony could tell it nearly caused the boy to have an aneurysm.

"*There might not be a next time,*" said Natasha, dodging one of Sam's blasts. She only had time to give him a dirty look before a tree nearly came her way. Briskly, she avoided it.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y., give me a quick visual." Tony was starting to lose hope. He didn't know why he hadn't contacted F.R.I.D.A.Y. about this earlier. If he learns the fighting patterns of this thief, maybe it'll work easier to catch the sod.

"*Scanning now.*"

There was a moment of the awful blasts and sounds in Tony's ears and the bright lights swimming before his eyes when Friday spoke again.

"*It appears his heart rate is slowing down—abnormally so for someone running at his speed.*" It was possible for her Irish accent to thicken with concern. Surly his A.I. wasn't sympathising the boy? Maybe so ... as said, he's just a child. "*Only now is he approaching a dead end with another tunnel. You have only a matter of seconds before you lose him, boss.*"

"Team, forward!"

At Tony's shout piercing their ears, they gave it their best shot in flying/running as fast as they could. Tony finally let out his lasers and pointed them around the boy, disheartening his chance of finding any escape. Tony lowered himself to the ground just in time for another person to step out from the trees, silver, mental arm raised and slamming it straight into the boy's face. With a sickening, metal clink, the boy was flat on his back, head crashing dangerously to the ground.

They all stopped, easily pleased yet piqued at Bucky's easy attempt at finally stopping the boy.

Bucky shook his head, smirk laying on his face as he snatched Steve's card from the boy's death grip and the money back.

"You guys have no imagination in inviting me to the party," he said curtly.

Tony took off his helmet, tempted to punch Bucky's smug look from his face. He then decided it wasn't a good idea.

Natasha made her way to the damp ground, holding the boy's cheeks by her hands. Roughly, she lifted one of his eyelids. All internally sighed in relief, happy Bucky didn't kill the kid. Then again, he knocked him in the face, and by the looks of it, managing to break his nose in the process from the odd, cricked shape and blood starting to ooze from his nostrils. There would be a nice, huge bruise covering wherever he was most predominantly hit.

"Barnes, to be fair, you had the element of surprise on him," said Vision, landing next to the super soldier.

"And my advantage of my awesome laser beams." Tony raised a hand.

"Whatever." Bucky shrugged. "We've got Steve's card back, that's one thing. No sign of his sketch book on the whole?"

They all shook their heads.

“We got a lead now,” Wanda said after a moment. “He can easily tell us where it is. He may not have it, but he certainly knows someone who does.”

“So what do we do with him?” said Sam.

“We take him with us,” replied Natasha. “He needs a little medical attention. We’ll give him a fix up, but that’s all we can do.”

“You’re telling me. I ain’t forgiving him.”

“Look, he isn’t going to stay with us for long,” said Tony, glaring down at the boy. “Once we get Steve’s things back, he’ll go. We have no room for a kid, let alone one who’s a criminal.”

“Well, we’ll make our way back to the compound then.” Wanda let her posture relax at knowing she can finally rest her still fever-hazed body. She then turned to Bucky who, like Tony, was glaring down at the kid, his smile now gone. “I’m guessing Happy is with you?”

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. He’s just in the streets. He needed to run a few errands anyways.” There was a short pause before Bucky yawned tiredly. “Who’s gonna carry him?”

“Fuck. That." Sam scoffed as if it were the most absurd thing he's heard all week.

He started to walk off before his wing set settled its balanced and allowed him to fly off. This is the same with Vision, casting a glance at Tony before disappearing. They would make their own way back to the compound. Tony would do the same.

“I’ll carry him,” said Natasha. Slowly and carefully, she bent down and got one arm under the kid’s neck and the other under his knees. Easily, she lifted him, bringing him up more so his head and lock of tawny curls fell onto her shoulder.

Only now did Tony recognise something about the kid with his eyes closed. The dirty face, curls ... long eyelashes casting shadows over his sickly pale and battered face. He was sure it was the kid from a few days ago now. Knowing that he had generously given this kid some food only to now find out the kid was actually an unclassed criminal, broke his heart. He knew it was pathetic; hell, he didn’t really take a particular interest in the homeless as selfish as it sounds ... but the hundreds of times he has said to himself, kids are different because they are *just kids* ... all seems to be wasted. All respect is gone just by this one act.

Tony never should have trusted to give anything out. After all, since when has he cared of such for these things.

And with one final—*bitter*—look, he took off, away from the scene and leaving behind a curious Black Widow on his back.

Chapter End Notes

> i cannot not believe how far this story has come and i appreciate every one of you to enjoy, leave kudos and drop comments. it makes me so happy, and without all of you, i wouldn't have the motivation to share my passion for writing x3 so thank you so so much!

cyber hugz! <3

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Damaged beyond repair. That's all Peter could see. For hours and hours he had waited for her, and she never turned up home. In his heart, he knew eventually he would have to get up and look for her. But his brain kept on scolding him.

"May is just working late."

"She just forgot to tell me."

Fingers anxiously pulled at his trousers, hands pale and shaky. A quick glance at his watch told him it was now 2 a.m. Aunt May is never this long coming home. Although, it *was* like her to take extra shifts just so she could fend for her and Peter. God, she always did so much. And all Peter did in return is not care enough. If he would have gotten up sooner. If he had been by her side. If he had told her he loved her. If only—all of these 'if's' that never happened.

Only then did Peter realise why Aunt May was not home.

He slaughtered through the streets. New York; Queens, his home since he was a child. Since Uncle Ben and Aunt May scooped him from Child Protection Services' brutal arms and made a world worth living for him. It was surprisingly quiet for the night. Perhaps because it was a school night? No crimes to deal with? Not that Peter really had that on his mind at the moment.

His feet automatically worked themselves the route May takes to get to and from work. It wasn't such a long way to the hospital — where she worked as a part time nurse. He should get there in no time. The route she takes is around a small, narrow corner. Street lights flickered here and there, leading into the mouth of an alley. Peter passed it, not so much as breaking a sweat and worked his legs more up the hill.

Another narrow corner and there.

Silence.

A piercing screech echoed in Peter's ears, senses dialled to eleven on this night.

First, there was the rear of the car.

Peter stopped, feet attached to the hard surface of the concrete road.

Not much apart from the few scratches and dents.

He moved forwards again.

On the right of the car wasn't the worst of it. Because when he rounded the car, he found another car there. Much bigger than their beat-up, mini car. It had crashed into the front, wheels squealing against the road and flipped nearly upside down. It had crushed the windshield, the left dominated its fall.

Suddenly, Peter was speeding around the upside down car to the left side where Aunt May normally sat.

He could hear his own voice.

“Aunt May!”

Shaking fingers, with all his might, broke off the car door.

“May!”

He was hyperventilating, his throat tightening and bile bubbling, forcing it’s way from his mouth. But he pushed it back, screaming, crying to let May be *okay.*

And when the door was ripped from its hinges, there he found her. The car’s front had crushed her chest. Blood—brown, cold, drying blood coated the side of her face. Her chest was pushed in, the smell of metallic substances hitting his nose.

“Please, May!”

He didn’t register his stuttering ramble as he weakly attempted to push the car off her. Even with his strength, even though he managed to lift a building from his shoulders, he couldn’t do it. Arms like a baby giraffes and heart in his throat, Peter collapsed to the ground. And all he could do was just cry. And cry. And *cry.*

Until he finally woke up and called an ambulance.

“How old is he?”

“Does it look like I know, Cap? Ask Buckaroo, he’s the one who knocked the kid out.”

“He’s too young. You didn’t have to be so violent.”

“Look, Rogers, we got him for you—”

“I didn’t mean for you to bring him back here! I needed him to just tell me where my stuff is—”

“Do you not understand the fact that we all told you the kid wouldn’t stand down?”

“You didn’t have to injure him...”

“For fuck’s sake; *IT WAS BUCKY. NOT. ME!*”

Peter woke with a gasp, startling the two men who were currently in a pretty heated argument. He was lying on a bench; a clean, crisp white one in what looked to be a hallway of some sort. It was dominated by glass windows only, allowing him to see into many offices—if they really were offices.

He hasn’t had a dream of May since ages. She was almost wiped completely from his sleeping patterns until now. And he wondered why.

At least he didn’t wake up with tears pooling his gaunt cheeks. That had not only been heart-wrenching, but embarrassing when Jordan had woken him up and had teased him about it for the rest of the day.

He sat up, groaning quietly until a gentle hand pushed him back down.

“No, rest. You were hit pretty hard.”

That was a new voice. His was gentler, quieter. Peter felt comforted by the soft-spoken man.

“Give the kid a break, Tony. We just need him to talk.”

Peter squinted through his eyelids to find three men in the room. One was wearing a lab coat with greying, dark curls fixed upon his head; eyes soft and puppy like with his brow creased in what Peter saw to be ... worry?

The other man was ... oh, the other man—Steve Rogers: blonde, tired blue eyes and an unreadable expression planted on his face.

Peter was suddenly equipped with fear. Even when his eyes roamed the other man who so happened to be *the Tony Stark*. What would the Captain do to him despite looking like a sad, kicked puppy? Surely he must be angry with Peter? If anything, when Peter looked back at Mr. Stark, he looked more angrier than Mr. Rogers. He didn’t know which was worse — a sad Captain America or an angry Iron Man.

“Hey, buddy, it’s okay...” The man with the soft-spoken voice came over. “We just wanna ask you a few question—and - and, please don’t run away. Think we’re all tuckered out for one day.” This was followed by a nervous chuckle, eyes travelling to Mr. Stark’s and Mr. Rogers before aiming them back at Peter. “We just need you to talk, okay?”

Peter shook his head. The haze of his mind was begging for water and the horrid, dry taste in his mouth told him he hadn’t eaten in a long time. There was no way he was going to talk. Not now. Not ever. He had kids to look after. He had no time to worry for himself—he just needed to get that food to the kids. So what if the other best him to the pulp for it? Him not going home empty handed.

Mr. Rogers sighed, shaking his head. Peter started to sit up again, despite the somewhat doctor’s protests and landed himself leaning back against the rest and hands folding into his lap. The blonde then bent down, sitting on his calf’s in front of Peter so he was looking up at Peter, trying not to intimidate him.

“Kid, I really need my things back.”

Peter gulped. Squeezing his eyes shut, he forced himself to shake his head again. This was mainly because he had no idea where he has stored his rucksack with Steve’s things. At the time of the chase, he had stowed it somewhere he could not remember. Not only that, the lack of food and water? It’s bound to put one’s brain into a puzzle mine.

“Why not?”

Oh, Peter knew that look. Aunt May used to give him that looking of utter disappointment. It always broke his heart. He would rather be yelled at. A kid’s worst nightmare is being a disappointment, and that was always Peter’s end. The one thing he purposely tried to set himself not to do is let people down. So far he’s done with many: his parents, Uncle Ben, Aunt May, Ned, the others, the kids ... and now Steve Rogers.

“Why not?”

Yell, thought Peter, *just tell at me!*

“I-I...” he swallowed, pushing back tears. He didn’t know why he was crying; he was being pathetic and he knew it. Wasn’t it him who put himself in this situation? Lowering his head, Peter whispered, “I can’t tell you.” He couldn’t look at Mr. Rogers. The feeling was building itself up inside his chest. Each situation he manages to scramble himself up into always ends with the overwhelming ending of pure dismay.

“Sure you can, kid,” came Mr. Stark’s curt voice. Peter looked up and jumped slightly when he saw the man’s shadow looming over him. “We didn’t get Robocop to knock you out for nothing. Either you talk now or we’re gonna have to search ourselves, okay?”

For a moment, Peter wondered why he ever looked up to this man. Then he remembered; he looked up to Mr. Stark for his inventions and true ideas of inventions and the clarity of his brain, not for his soul. It was never said Mr. Stark was particularly mean, just not a people-person. And by Peter’s knowledge, Mr. Stark doesn’t have any interactions with kids at all. The youngest Avenger on the team is Scarlet Witch—Wanda, he thinks. No kids allowed. No one younger—unless the papers are leaving others out.

“Go easy, Tony—” Mr. Rogers started.

Tony suddenly whirled around and Peter dared take a look. From what he could see through a blurry vision, Mr. Stark’s face was turning a nice shade of red, eyes fuming and nostrils flared. A little thing like fear crept up Peter’s spine and coloured his shoulders white at the sight. Even Mr. Rogers took a step back from the look of vanity edged onto Mr. Stark’s face.

His voice was scarily low, waiting for the volcano to erupt. “You *wanted* that sketch book. You *wanted* us to look for it. You have NO RIGHT to call us out on snatching the kid just as badly as he snatched your fucking satchel! You and him are quite alike in a way.”

Mr. Rogers blue eyes flashed dangerously. He took a deep breath, calming himself to a point Peter felt necessary to direct the brunette’s attention away from the Captain.

“Tony, I know you’re upset. But you decided it best to steal the kid, not me. I just needed to know where my things were—“

“OVER A FUCKING SKETCH BOOK!”

All three others didn’t expect the explosion to happen so soon. It was obvious the poor man has had a rough couple of days. His ape-like fury turned until he stared wide-eyed at Peter. Said boy pressed himself against the back of the bench, shaking hands coming up to grip at his hoodie strings. He managed to pull his legs up and towards his chest so he was almost hanging off of the bench.

Mr. Stark took no such mercy of the scared child in front of him. Peter didn’t think so.

“Who even gave the *right* to steal things? Things that people have worked so hard for! And you just take it away from them!” With one step, Tony was bending down and snatching Peter’s lithe fingers away from his hoodie strings and gripping hard at his wrist.

“*Tony—!*” The man with the soft-spoken voice crowded over with Mr. Rogers also preparing to hold Tony back.

“People will help you, kid,” he growled. Then, as quick as Mr. Stark was holding him, he retreated, almost shocked by what he had done. The fury from his face was gone and he took a deep breath before storming from the hallway and down the many offices, soon out of sight.

Peter tripped over his own feet trying to get up from the bench. He did so; his body smacked to the polished, marbled floors. The two men behind him carefully lifted him up and Peter flinched away from their touches like they had burned him.

“I’ll go after him,” announced the doctor, making his exit with an awkward nod.

What was left of the four now turned down to two. Peter was still standing up, looking anywhere but Mr. Rogers.

For a moment, he scanned each and every window; each and very possible escape route. Underneath his hoodie he could still feel his trusty web shooters that would allow him for an escape, to sustain himself and swing to life through the city. Only to then realise they were in no tower. It only just hit that the Avengers Tower was tower was sold and they had all moved up state. Now that his eyes properly roamed the place, he found the windows made a clear display of the outside. Mostly greenery and woods from what he could tell. There was no place for him to swing.

Next, which was on his mind, was to bypass Mr. Rogers via his speed. He would have to risk Mr. Rogers seeing his unnatural human abilities if it means to escape. Then, as time goes on, he learns from his past mistakes and works harder on better camouflaging himself in these sort of circumstances. He didn’t think anyone from the wild goose chase noticed anything peculiar about him apart from the fact he was a fast runner.

“I know what you’re thinking, son,” Mr. Rogers low voice reached Peter’s ears.

Peter remained quiet, eyes dancing back and forth between each row of offices.

“I don’t mean to sound irritating, and I hope you understand that.”

Peter tried not to listen to his understanding voice; he would never understand how Peer felt, so why should Steve’s empathetic and caring voice take such a tool on him? Steve’s voice was enchanting enough for Peter to feel comfortable to take his eyes from the office windows and focus his attention on Steve. His voice wasn’t sympathetic (which Peter despised). And that brought Peter’s up-most attention.

“Do you think you could ever surprise me one day?” the man asked gently.

Peter raised an eyebrow, confused by Steve’s question. Whatever could the man mean? Surprise him? The only surprising thing that’s happened to Peter in the last year was when he walked from a shop and had set off the alarm—something that had never happened before. He must of made a mistake somewhere.

“If you ever got my things back, could I get them from you? And only you?”

Peter didn’t know what to say or do. Was this a way of apology on Peter’s behalf?

One day, Mr. Rogers is hoping for redemption from Peter. False hoping that Peter will one day hand his stuff back. And Peter gladly would. He just didn’t know where they were among the forest. Not only that, this could be a trap. Something to drop the ball onto Peter at the very last second so he can once again be crushed and overpowered. That is one thing Peter can not stand is people overpowering him; people thinking they are better than him. To some, he may be a push over—no, because insults go through one ear and out the other. Bruises fade with time and patience. Emotional comebacks have a way of breaking him down, only for him to build himself back up again like a fallen building because looking after those kids motivates him to do more everyday. He knows for a strong fact that he could deftly subjugate Jordan and the others.

Wouldn't that be a spectacular idea? The only problem is they have grown so used to kicking Peter down and using his small stature as an advantage, he can't just suddenly change.

With Mr. Rogers in front of him, giving him a small, encouraging smile nearly tipped him over the edge. Nearly. It takes a lot more than a supporting person to get Peter to climb from his comfy bubble of shame and defence.

"I can."

Peter mentally smacked himself for saying that. It isn't as if he is promising anything, but by the way Mr. Rogers' blue eyes went from a cloud of misery to a happy rainbow in seconds made him want to promise it. But how can he?

"I'll be needed soon, okay?" said Mr. Rogers, sitting up to stretch his large limbs over his head and stand up.

Peter took in the clothing for today. His normal smart checkered collar with a dark blue sweater for support and a pair of skinny jeans. He was getting there with the modern day clothing and with the style, though still has his blonde fringe combed and swept to the side. The boy couldn't help but admire the man in front of him.

"We still need you here, okay? Do you understand me?"

There was the worry again. This time, no worry for Peter; more worry for Peter becoming free and mischievous to do whatever he pleases. Peter can promise Steve, but he won't be promising to stay out of trouble.

"I understand."

Steve smiled and made his way from the hall. Peter supposed they were expecting him to be in the same place when they came back. That is unlikely to happen. For Peter knew he couldn't stay here. If he is in the Avengers compound, then there must valuable things around. Even better, there will be food and fresh portable water for Peter to smuggle out.

Head whipping side to side and eyes scanning for any secret camera's, Peter went on his way, the complete opposite direction the others had gone.

Rounding the corner, the thin, carpeted floor led to another long hallway. Squinting his eyes, Peter found at the end there were two pairs of stairs. One leading forwards and the other up. He stood there, deciding what he should do. He guessed leading himself upstairs could be an ambush of Avengers. However, if common sense was consuming his mind, he would say the best place to put food—preferably a kitchen—it upstairs. Whereas the downstairs could also lead to an ambush of Avengers and a lobby, with no kitchen, dining room, bedrooms...

Peter let himself walk.

The offices still remained on each side of him. With shaky fingers, he traces the clean cut windows, his dirty hands smearing a little dirt on each one. He couldn't bring himself to care. It has been so long since he's been able to touch something so ... so clean and pure.

A shudder coursed itself up Peter's spine, his thoughts and head in the clouds. Maybe it was a good time to grab himself some food as well.

The stairs was not a long way up. And when he strained his ears to hear better, no taps of feet of low murmurs of voice crossed his eardrums. Slowly, he was sending his trip up the stairs. He

poked his head over the barrier, light curls sticking up at the top of his head. No one seemed to be here so he allowed himself to fully step up onto the upstairs floor.

Vacant. Silent.

Another shudder shook Peter. Reminded him of the last few days in his apartment with May.

The first part was into an open living room area. Next to that was a kitchen. Everything seemed to be glass. So very rich. Something Peter will never be able to afford for his kids.

Ever so slowly, he made his way to the kitchen. Something was brewing on the stove, bubbling slight. This meant he only had a few minutes before someone was to give him the element of surprise.

Feet in swift motion, he threw open the cupboards up ahead. He would have to climb upon the counter reach the shelves without breaking anything.

He did.

His hands grabbed at thing she knew would last a long time. There were biscuits, cereals, bread.

He took the bread and biscuits. The fridge would contain a few drinks.

He found some fizzy drinks and normal, cold water. He took the water and a few fizzy Fanta's before shutting it. This was all he could carry.

A noise pierced his ears. He directed himself to a turn, nearly banging into the counter top. It was now or never. He would never be able to outrun them this time. Not with these items at hand.

He stuffed the fizzy drinks into his hoodie pocket along with the biscuits, hoping they would be secure enough. Each individual thought of the kids were the only things motivating him to get the hell away from this compound. Only then to realise again that there were no buildings. It was trees.

Bread gripped tightly in his hand, he ran to the window, presenting his web shooter and kicked open the window.

It felt like he was falling, wind brushing the bitter taste of salt on his cheeks until he finally thrust his hand forward and shot a web to the nearest tree. With luck, he latched on, swinging to life and landing on the branch. He landed in a wobbly crouch position, leaning his head against the tree. He knew he was in a vulnerable position. The trees behind him begged him to swing free, to get to his kids and give them food. He had a great for them—Fanta, a luxury they have never been giving for what he is concerned.

His thoughts wondered to the integrity he was allowed when with Aunt May and Uncle Ben. Those hugs and kisses he was showered in everyday for years and years. The special take away's he would have a good once a month. Praise he would get for passing yet another test.

Each clarity of kindness and faith placed into his heart was all from love and a tenderness touch that those kids have never have. Most likely will never have.

He snapped back into reality. He had to do this. He promised those kids a home. And he was going to give them a home.

Chapter End Notes

ahh, i know it’s thursday! but yesterday was a long day. spent all day at universal which was the time of my life. bought a marvel hoodie for myself and a cute, chibi wolverine pin for one of my best friends. ‘twas great. i’m loving america xD

anyways, next update will probably either be tuesday or thursday, as i’m flying back to england on wednesday.

thank you for all the feedback and comments i have gotten. they mean so much to me <3

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> just uploading a chapter early because we all know how terrible i am at uploading schedules. let's just say this; uploading whenever i can—early updates and that. but the deadline is always wednesday. so, if i haven't uploaded on wednesday and it's thursday, feel free to yell at me xD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony was about to murder Steve.

How dim witted did one have to be to allow a thief to scrounge out their cupboards and then let him go? Every time they catch the kid, he manages to slip through their fingers like a fish. Carelessly, Steve left the kid in the hallway.

Thankfully, Bruce was a genius. And the things that come from a genius with common sense permits them to catch the kid ... yet again.

Place a tracker on the inside of his hoodie.

"Do you think this is a game of hide and seek, Steve? Because it isn't." Tony had his face down on a notepad—why he had a notepad, he had no clue. Steve or Bucky must have given it to him. So far all he's written down is useless information and ridiculously horrendous drawings.

"Just don't worry then," the blonde snapped. "Don't worry about retrieving my things. I can get another, anyway."

Bucky stepped in, fury written all of his face. "Ah, no. That is not gonna happen. Perhaps if we actually reason with this kid—"

"There's no reasoning to be done. Didn't we try and do that?" said Tony, voice still muffled.

"Don't interrupt him when he's trying to make a point," growled Natasha. She obviously knew what he was trying to get at.

Bucky shot a grateful glance towards her before resuming. "Perhaps if we reasoned with the kids happenings, then maybe he'll come from this little protective bubble his built for himself."

Tony rolled his eyes, fingers clenching into fists. "I never took you for the poet, Barnes. Should we start a library?"

This then earned him a smack on the back of his head from Natasha. He was going maybe a little too far.

Bruce timidly stepped in, raising a hand to ask if he could say something (bless his heart). "May I say it isn't ... completely over. I did put a tracker in him."

"That's one's way to violate his privacy," said Steve.

Again, Tony really wanted to murder the blonde. Had he been hit on the head by Natasha a bit too hard recently? Whatever the case, it was getting on his last nerve. Steve was meant to be the Captain of the team; most responsible for not only the missions—no matter how small—but for their well-being too. Tony was losing his sleep over this.

“Fuck it,” said Tony.

“Wh-what do you mean ... ‘Fuck it’?” Bucky crosses his arms over his chest, raising his eyebrows at the Stark.

“Track the kid, Banner. I have no time for this shit. He’s gone a bit over the line by stealing more stuff from us when he knows he’s already been caught. It’s all bullshit. Did his parents ever teach him discipline?”

It is very unlike Tony to become this erratic. Usually, the man would stick to one mood and one mood only. But he keeps fluctuating between frustration, rage, guilt and sadness. So far, he’s shown more anger towards Steve: frustration at the team’s irresponsibility to find a kid that is even smaller than Bruce himself: guilt at the way he approached said kid: sadness in knowing maybe the kid had no choice but to steal. However, that doesn’t excuse the behaviour of snatching Steve’s whole satchel. And Tony may not be expressing his actions in a concerning way, but he cared deeply for Steve as he did the others. They are his family, and he didn’t need Steve to be unhappy.

No one dare breath another word and got back to work. Tony followed Bruce to his lab, running a hand through his already messy hair.

It is always wise to never question Tony, so Bruce made the sage decision and fired up their office as soon as they got into the room. Tony allowed himself a few minutes of little breathing before going to help Bruce.

The scientist brought up a screen, showing their own location. A few more clicks and it was zooming into a wooded area. Who knew there was so many trees in this giant city?

A pointed, blinking dot flashed before their eyes, signalling where the kid is. It was a hard location to read, especially when the red blinks were glitching, implying that the location near is satellite proof. Bruce murmured something under his breath. Tony reached forwards himself and clicked on the red dot—double tapping—which led them to zooming in further.

The wood’s are familiar. They are the wood’s him and the team chased the kid down in. Tony wondered whether this is where the boy lives. He cannot honestly be living in the woods. Trees can act as great shelters but only for a certain amount of time before rain becomes to dense for the leaves to carry; before the sun’s rays become to hot for leaves to shield.

The dot moved again, further into the woods and near some tunnels.

“Homeless people live in there,” mumbled Bruce. “Cops never normally go down there. Too risky of an ambush. It’s better to leave them to themselves.”

“In other words,” finished Tony. He leaned over, hands coming down on the desks. A frown played on his lips and put a crease in his brow. How can thinking of a plan to approach a kid be this hard? Obviously catching him, basically kidnapping him and leaving him here wasn’t the best option. Now that Tony thinks about it, bringing him here was one of the worst ideas they could have come up with.

“It’s easier to talk to him like this,” said Bruce. “Not directly at his ...” He coughed awkwardly.

“...At his home, but near the woods.”

“We tried that,” deadpanned Tony.

Bruce gave him a look, indicating that maybe Tony didn’t have a lot of common sense when it comes to dealing with teenagers. “You all scared him. Maybe follow him without the suits—”

“We had a feeling he would run. And maybe scaring him was the best option.”

Bruce sighed, placing a palm over his eyes. Then, he took it down, not looking at Tony anymore. Diverting his gaze elsewhere, he said, “All kids react in different ways; I should know, okay?”

Tony winced, suddenly feeling ashamed.

Howard Stark may of not been the greatest dad when paying attention to his children, but he never once laid a finger on Tony. *Ever*. Full stop. He wished his dad hadn't of neglected him, failing to tell his own son that he loved him. Even after watching that video of Howard, his own father that made a little video message for him, telling him he was his greatest creation, it didn’t make Tony feel much better. Howard still ignored him. But with Bruce ... Bruce is an entire different story. So different that Tony had a hard time comprehending a dad would actually become a monster to his own child.

Guiltily, he gave Bruce an apologetic look and the scientist smiled lightly at him. Apology accepted.

They focused back on the task at hand, forgetting what had just been exchanged between them.

“This kid obviously doesn’t get scared into submission,” continued Bruce. “So that’s off the list. How about an approach slowly?”

“Again, I did that when we first came face to face with him,” said Tony.

“Did you have the suit on?”

Tony looked down, nodding.

Bruce made a noise of acknowledgment. They went back to the screen. “I don’t think he would like it if you or any of the others that were on that chase to go to him.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Tony.

“I’m talking about someone else going to him ... Me? ... Steve—”

“Definitely not Steve,” grumbled Tony. “Kid can't even look after another kid.” There was a short pause. “I think you should go.”

It seemed as if Bruce wasn’t expecting Tony to so outwardly say that.

No one ever really trusts Bruce—scratch that; t wasn’t Bruce they didn’t trust, it was Hulk himself. If Bruce so much as goes over the line of raging then the Hulk will come out. And though Bruce is gradually starting to control him preferably, it was still a risk to send Bruce out there. The Hulk would have smashed that kid to smithereens by now. So they let their doctor do his things in his lab, do what he does best, and that is helping people heal. Unless of a dire emergency, Bruce is not called.

“Y-You think I should go?” Bruce said, a little unsure. His hands fiddled into an embrace,

squeezing them helplessly.

“You suggested it,” said Tony.

Bruce, again, let his gaze wander aimlessly at that.

Tony shook his head and sat back down, moments from this week slamming into his brain like a stampede of elephants. Reflective times for the past couple of days ... he could easily blame it on the fact him and Pepper are on a break. Or how Steve made that stupid “Good and Bad” speech, causing Tony to go outside and level up his anxiety. He could blame it on many, many things. But he didn’t think he deserved to.

He did a good deed; did he not hand that kid food at the start of the week? Only to have it all thrown back in his face when the kid takes his friends things, and when they try to reason with him, be nice to him, he repays them by taking their bread, biscuits and Fanta ... Wanda was not happy.

What was it that the kid so desired? Money? Fame? If so, he wasn’t doing a good job.

Tony may not understand the concepts of having to fight to survive in the sense of being poor. Always having the clarity of warm food, warm bed, roof over his head, access to the newest of new technology. Though he has been over this at least a good hundred times in his head for the past week, he still frowns to himself in shame. Thinking he has the audacity to complain ... he can’t help who he is.

“I’ll go then,” came Bruce’s quiet voice.

Tony, without turning to look at him, said, “Only if you’re up to it, Brucie-Bear, okay? You don’t have to.”

“I want to. If it gets this mess all sorted out.”

If it gets this mess all sorted out.

Tony barley registered the leave of Bruce. He knew that the scientist was to make his leave soon—today? Tomorrow? In a weeks time? Tony wasn’t sure.

From what Bruce had just stated left him in a dream-like haze once again. Maybe it was because he hasn’t had the coffee load today he normally has today.

Any other silly alien battle, monsters taking over the world, or Thanos making his appearance to Earth ... nothing seemed to compare to what a puzzle this kid seemed to be. The way he ran, the way he disappeared into thin air, crumpling under their gazes and sneakily dipping in and out of trouble right before them.

One big mess that the kid started and would most likely finish at this rate. If it is to carry on like this, their only other options were to call the police or leave the child’s crimes to himself.

No. Tony never goes down without a fight.

Slamming his pen back onto the desk, his chair swivelled until he was in front of the security footage of the compound. His eyes bore into the screen, something his friends would disapprove of. The fingers that worked onto the screen, tapping vigorously, they twitched to hold a scolding mug of black coffee.

He took his time in looking further into the kid's facial features within his mind. He had no info on the kid, so it was next to impossible to know where he came from, who he was and originally came from and what he was doing out there with no home to go back to. (Unless you count the tunnels as his home, which made Tony cringe in discomfort). Is it possible for your heart to mentally hurt? Tony could feel it pulse inside of his chest, straining and yearning for comfort—not for him, but for the kid. And all of the other kids that lay lifeless outside of the warmth of proper shelters. The kid had qualities to him that Tony lacked.

The man that sat bare at the computer, heart slowly and painfully gripping at the strings that were hardly keeping him together at the thought of how he treated the boy. For starters, the eyes were what caught onto Tony the most. When he had scolded, accused and almost shouted at the kid, most would expect a little fright. Those brown eyes of his melting at the cognisance of an adult angry with him—which never once happened. Maybe the well of tears might have pushed Tony into yielding. No such thing as tears. And they wandered; they looked right through him. His eyes were so devoid of colour Tony was startled back into his own mind to stop chiding the child at hand. A ghost followed the kid to his compound and made a comfy home within his eyes—eyes that should be full of child-like innocence. A puppy dog look that resembled Bruce's eyes which were slowly becoming lighter and brighter each day.

Not this kid's.

And Tony sat flabbergasted.

Next was the kid's skin. Once should have been so clean; clean of any cuts and bruises. Any child would get their hands dirty, but then wash it off later. Any teen would come home with cuts and bruises; whether that be from being tripped over by the typical school bully or from rough-housing with their mates, the clumsy brats always end up injuring themselves. And it's the parents job to take care of their flaws because they can't seem to do that themselves.

This kid caught his bruises and dirt from living on the streets. His hair, wild and curly, a mixture of mud, dirt, grease and even blood caked the thick locks. Dry, cracked lips that boarded his mouth that scarcely made a peep, too raw and exhausted. Or just fear of the adults casting their shadows over his ridiculously thin frame.

Tony shook his head. All of these thoughts. All of the culpability that swam and swarmed at his brain cells were increasing his breathing and making his frame shake. It wasn't an anxiety attack. He knew that. Because he felt fine. He just felt like crying ... over a kid he couldn't help. A kid he *cannot* help.

Finally, after what seemed like hours (but were only minutes), Tony sat up from his desk and did not bother in turning everything off. It was in his choice of actions he was to return here today. In the next hour or so, just to try and find a little something on the kid. He had no idea where this sudden need to feel some kind of longing for this kid; Tony blamed it on the lack of sleep and coffee. Or perhaps because he had helped him once before and he felt ashamed for grabbing the kid's hands like he had. The boy was very clearly touch-starved and deprived of any sort of love for a very long time. So grabbing him was not the best action to take. Who knows? Tony may of been the main reason the kid fled like a baby animal running from the predators in hunt to get under his skin. He shouldn't let his thoughts come so lost in his mind. Otherwise he will never be able to pull his head from out of the void for a very long time.

It wasn't until he was in the main living area his head cleared. Although his thoughts still lingered faintly on the kid, he saw another, lying on the sofa, blanket pulled over her shoulders with Steven Universe playing on the T.V. Sometimes Tony forgets how young Wanda is. A half drunk hot

chocolate was sat at the table. At the sides are crusted with dry cream and a couple of remaining marshmallow's were left. Tony walked passed her, giving her a long look and very faintly brushed a palm over her forehead. She was still quite warm, but improving. By the end of the week she shall be fine.

He let himself be directed towards the kitchen. His hands itching for a coffee and mouth watering just at the thought of it. All functioning moments aside for now, Tony fought his battle of making himself a coffee even though the machine did most of the job. And as he sat there, waiting for the machine to do its job, he spotted Steve coming in.

The blonde still looked terrible to say the least. The sadness in his eyes were still there and his movements more sluggish than graceful. In fact, was that a blush across his face? Tony raised his eyebrows at the man when he approached him.

"I'm sorry, Tony," he said, looking at him dead in the eyes.

Tony deflated, his shoulders sagging visibly. He had never once been scared of Steve—apart from the time he tore his arc reactor out from his suit with his shield—but hearing Steve apologise for something that wasn't his fault relieved Tony. It isn't Steve's fault. Someday, yes, place your satchel in plain sight, but he couldn't help the chain of events after that. The chase. The taking. The running. All in all, Steve worried he had pushed his team beyond their limits for a stupid sketch book. A sketch book Tony now saw meant a lot to Steve. But there was something else there that the blonde wasn't telling Tony about. Bucky was solely strictly allowed to know, which Tony somewhat respected.

"You shouldn't apologise, Cap—"

"It's not that," said Steve quickly. "I mean, for making you do all of this; for letting him escape. I can tell when you're stressed out and it is my fault for making that happen. So ... I'm really sorry about this."

Tony couldn't restrain himself from leaning over and placing a hand on Steve's broad shoulder, patting it in a friendly manner. "I accept your apology. I'm just waiting for everyone else's now."

With a mischievous smile and an odd look from Steve, Tony grabbed his coffee mug and disappeared. Faintly, he heard Steve's *"Hey"* in protest. Before he could attack Tony from behind, Tony swiftly ran down the stairs, down to his lab and locked the door.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y., alert me of any news," he said casually and sat down.

"Will do, boss."

Chapter End Notes

> was educating my mum and step dad about tom and haz and my step dad made a good imitation of me if i ever met tom. i said i'd just probably hug him, tell him he's great and that's it. then he just outright said, "no you wouldn't. you'd get all shy and flustered then run a mile" —which is true. i get so shy; i hardly talk. so i'm happy with just hiding by the sidelines.
>
> comments and kudos ... you all are simply amazing. thank you <33

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

> HUGE WARNING(S): intended rape/non-con, pedophilia, thievery, strong language
>
> if this makes you uncomfortable, it starts at “As soon as his sight spotted the cracked sign of Knockturn Woods, he sprinted his way down there.” and ends at “From the alley, he stumbled his way out.”
>
> it even makes me uncomfortable, and i did not enjoy writing that part. though it is only brief, the thought and knowledge that it happens sickens me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Following the dizzy swinging home and constant reminder that the Avengers will be on his ass for a while, Peter was considering allowing himself to sit down for a bit. But that comes to no acceptation when he’s got kids to feed.

He continues his trek through the open woods until he has reaches the tunnel. He’s also left to think of his whereabouts. He’s sure he’s home. He’s sure he’s going to find the kids and take care of them. He’s not going to wake in an unfamiliar environment again ... that caused him to shudder. He couldn’t let that happen again.

His nose still throbbed, and with nothing left in his system, the concept of his healing powers were not working as well as he would like. If there was anything left then Peter would take it.

He entered the tunnel which was filled with it’s usual closed-in chatter and blazing warmth of nearby fires. He spotted the kid straight away. Instead of Emily’s normal leading stance there, Thomas was in front of the younger children, shielding them from other, meaner adults.

“Thomas?” croaked Peter as he came over.

The boy’s wide, blue eyes glimmered in the fires light before processing the sight of Peter.

“Peter’s back!” he shouted delightfully.

Peter only had a good couple of seconds of dropping the biscuits and bread to the floor before he got an armful or children. He dropped to his knees when Allison’s puny body collided with his, her short arms trying their best to wrap tightly around his middle. Then Millicent was on his back, hugging from behind. Thomas picked up the bread and Harry shyly stuck to Peter’s side, trying to embrace the comfort the teen had to offer.

“Is this all?” said Thomas. His pout wasn’t childish. Rather it was sad ... just ... *sad*. The look played with Peter’s heart strings. Peter ushered Allison off and pulled out the few bottles of now lukewarm Fanta he snatched for them.

Harry took the first one from Peter’s hand. “What is this?” he asked, tongue poking out between his teeth in a lisp.

Millicent grabbed one as well, her smile wide and eyes giving Peter a sense of hope; was that the

normality of childhood eyes he saw there? “Fanta! Fanta! Fanta! Petey got us Fanta!”

“Let me have some!” said Allison, taking the third one and ripping open the cap. Thomas had the last in his hand, knuckles turning white from the grip he forced upon it.

Harry held the bottle up to Peter, carefully choosing his choice of words. “Can you please open this, Peter?”

Peter nodded, smiling and took the bottle from the boy. When he opened it with a soft fizz, handing it back to Harry, the tiny boy drank some and reached out, taking hold of Peter’s hand. Peter couldn’t help but stand up and lift the boy, placing him on his hip.

“This’ delicious!” said Harry, hooking an arm around Peter’s shoulder whilst the other hand still occupied the Fanta. “Tastes like oranges.”

Allison gripped Peter’s trousers, giving him a puppy-dog look. “How comes Harry gets to be picked up? You haven’t picked me up in a long time!” To emphasise her point, she spread her arms wide, showing an invisible timeline of events. Peter rolled his eyes fondly, ruffling her hair just for second before having to support Harry again with two arms.

“I will soon.”

“Peter...”

The teen looked at Thomas. He nodded for him to go on.

The boy smiled softly. Something he shouldn’t see from such a youthful child. The smile needed to be twisted into a mischievous grin; the smile was too forthcoming—too *serious*.

“Thank you.”

“It’s okay.” He liked being around them, inspecting the kid’s, trying to ignore the gut-wrenching feeling that Emily still isn't there with them. “I’m sorry I was gone for a long time. Had stuff to do.”

“Anything important?” asked Millicent, taking another sip of her Fanta, savouring each and every drop.

“Nah. Just boring teenager stuff.”

Peter gestured for them to sit down by the wall and that’s exactly what they did. As he sat down, Allison tried to be nearer to him, almost climbing onto his lap which was already occupied by Harry. This resulted into basically nearly climbing onto Harry’s lap but after a soft scold from Peter, she stopped and just settled to leaning against his side. He put his arm around her skinny shoulders, warming her. Millicent was opposite them whilst Thomas sat the other side of Peter, taking out pieces of bread to share.

He gave them at least two pieces each—including Peter—and left more for later. Also not forgetting to leave some for Emily. Which reminded Peter—

“Where is Emily?” He didn’t mean to keep forgetting about her, but his mind is still fuzzy and it seems to be getting worse. Hopefully once these pieces of bread have settled themselves within his growling stomach, he’ll regain his eyesight and brain back.

They were silent for a moment before Thomas took charge. “She and Aaliyah went out training.”

That made Peter's blood run cold. Just as he was about to eat some bread, his hand dropped. Training ... with Aaliyah. That cannot be good. Not for someone like Emily.

Though the redhead was as hot-tempered as Aaliyah, Peter did not want Emily being taught by that ... that *bitch*. She would rub off on Emily, and that was a bad thing. Perhaps Peter's big-brother mode was kicking in at this moment, but God-held him if anything happens to that girl. She is like a little sister to him. After all, she was the one to help him out when he first came here. All of these kids were like little brothers and sisters. And he couldn't leave them on their own. He's done that enough lately.

"Training?" Peter said slowly. At Thomas' nod, he continued, "Training, are they? Th-that's good." He looked down.

"What's wrong, Pete?" asked Millicent, concern dripping with each word. Peter suddenly felt as if he couldn't eat. He needs to look after these kids ... what a shit job he's doing.

He turned to the white-blonde. "Nothing, Millie."

"Ahh, *noooo!*" whined Millicent, kicking his shin. "It's Millicent!"

They all giggled; even Thomas let out a little smile and carefully got out some biscuits. This time, only one each. This is a treat, a rarity to find so they must save some for later. Peter still had yet to eat.

This caused Harry to turn slightly in his lap, drool running down his chin and dirty fingers crushing the biscuit he had in his hands. "Peter eat?" Generously, he held the saliva covered biscuit to Peter's lips.

The teen moved away, chuckling lightly and pushed the biscuit down. "You eat it, Hazza, okay? I've got my own."

"But you're not eating, Peter," said Allison. She was still tucked into his side, staring at the huge wall opposite them. Other people—adults—were gathered in a circle there, torn, gloves fingers hovering over a fire. She then looked up. Tears glistened in her eyes and Peter panicked.

"Hey, *hey*, shh..." He shushed her as she silently began to sob. Harry took the message and climbed from Peter's lap so the teenager could take Allison into his waiting arms, pulling her head down to his chest as she silently cried. "Shh, you're okay, aren't you? You don't need to cry."

"I miss my mommy and daddy," she whispered in a cracked voice. "I want them here..."

The other three empathetically put down their snacks and gathered around the two, hugging in one giant bundle. Yet Allison still continued her wracking shakes and cold shivers of emotional and mental pain.

"Peter, why did they say I could never see mommy and daddy again?"

Peter hugged a little tighter, keeping his own tears back. His fingers shook again and his stomach clenched around an emptiness that needed to be filled. "I don't know, Ally ... I don't know."

"Did your mommy and daddy go to heaven?" asked Millicent, pulling back from the hug a bit.

Peter winced. It's not something you should ask, but Millicent is only eight-years-old. There was no such thing as a filter in a kid's little world.

“Uh-huh.” Allison nodded against Peter’s chest, her grip becoming looser. “But Jordy said they went to hell.”

Peter didn’t know what was worse. The fact that he knew the feeling of losing two parents at such a young age but lived the opulence between the sheltered arms of Uncle Ben and Aunt May, or that Jordan had the audacity to even say such a thing like that to a little girl of only five.

“Jordan is wrong,” growled Peter. The anger he has burning inside of him only grows larger when Allison’s sobs start up again.

“Then why did they h-have to g-go?” A wet cough escaped her. The other kids backed away slightly, giving Allison and Peter the space to breath. Peter held his hand up to her mouth to cover the saliva and mucus that was building at the edge of her lips. It no longer made him cringe because he’s dealt with the kids throwing up on him before many times. This is nothing to him.

Peter wiped the gunk on the grimy ground before pulling Allison back in for a hug. “Shh, shh...” He rocked her lightly, cheek against her tangled hair as her small fists curled in on his hoodie. “They are in heaven. Do you know how I know?”

“Mm?” She hummed as a response so she didn’t have to talk. Peter can already tell she is to take a small nap. She’s in need of one.

“Because they came out with such an intelligent, beautiful little girl. Her name is Allison.” A small, broken giggle sounded from the blonde as she buried deeper to him. “And she is the most caring and sweetest girl I have ever met. They wouldn’t go to heaven if they had created a mean girl, would they?”

“Hey ... that’s not true! False facts!” accused Millicent, a playful glint in her eyes.

Peter again rolled his eyes, smiling at the girl. “*One* of the most caring and kindest girls.”

“Am I really?” said Allison. It was said so quietly Peter hardly caught onto what she was saying.

“Of course you are, little bug.”

“What about boys?” sad Harry. “What abou’ me?”

Peter made a thoughtful face which earned a whine from Harry and a light-hearted chuckle from Thomas. “Ooh, that’s a difficult one...”

He let his hand tangle in Allison’s hair, brushing though the dead straight but tangled up locks. She clung to him like a koala, soaking his hoodie with tears, but he didn’t so much as care.

“You two are the most cheeky little boys I’ve ever known,” said Peter, reaching out and ruffling Thomas’ hair. The boy swatted his hand away but smiled as Harry giggled.

“I’ll have you know, I am not little,” said Thomas. He placed his hands on his hips, his bottom lip jutting out in a serious pout. This only made Peter laugh lightly.

For the first time in a while, Peter actually felt the bout of happiness he used to feel.

They sat there for a while, Peter trying his best to ignore the small sniffles that came from Allison. Eventually, she ate her biscuit as well as the others. Millicent and Thomas saved some Fanta for Emily when she gets back. He also laid out snacks for her, just for when she returns.

Just as they were settling down with Allison still tucked in Peter's lap and the others surrounding him, at least holding onto a piece of him, someone came into the tunnel. Peter would recognise the figure from anywhere. Though she has lived on the streets for several years—coming here much younger than Peter—she still manages to have strong hips and beautifully curved legs to a great upper body. Peter swore he was the only person in this whole tunnel that didn't drool over her.

A little someone was not trailing behind her.

"Aaliyah!" he yelled when she walked passed them. No Emily trailing behind her. There was no trace of the red-head. The girl turned around, black hair flying around her. Peter got a good look at her face. Her hair, though always looked as it hasn't been brushed in years (which is true) looked more frazzled than normal. Her lips were wet and big, almost bruised looking. Had she been in a fight?

"Aaliyah—"

"*What?*" she snapped, glaring daggers at him.

Allison whimpered and buried herself more into Peter. He held on impossibly tighter.

"Where is Emily?"

Aaliyah shrugged. "Why should I know where the brat is now?"

Peter's blood, once again, ran cold. "What to you mean ... *'now'?*"

Repeating her action from before, Aaliyah then turned and started to walk towards the ends of the tunnel. Peter gently pried Allison from his lap, which he got whined at for. She grabbed hold of his hoodie as he started to walk away.

"Thomas," said Peter and the boy understood. He grabbed hold of the girl's arm and started towing her away. Peter's heart broke when Allison started crying again.

"Peter! *Peter!*"

He had to ignore it. At the moment, Allison and the kids were safe. All except one it seemed.

"Aaliyah?" Peter pulled his hand away from her shoulder. She wasn't one for physical comfort at all. And he wanted to ask her calmly.

The girl swivelled round, surprised that Peter was right behind her. "What is it, Peter?"

"Aaliyah ... where is she?" His voice is desperate. He isn't to leave that little girl out there on her own. No matter how much the red head tells him that she can look after herself, Peter knows she's just being modest.

Aaliyah's brown eyes flickered with guilt. Peter stared, on edge. "I ..." She looked down, her hands coming together to pick on each-other. "I couldn't get him off her."

"*What?!*" Subconsciously, Peter grabbed at Aaliyah's shoulders, eyes boring into her's. Bitter cold and dark panic shook his bones and he broke out into a cold sweat, his breathing becoming ragged. "Aaliyah, tell me where she is!"

Someone in the background told them to shut up and quite the shouting. He didn't listen; he *needed* to know where Emily is.

Aaliyah gulped and said, “Down the alley, further towards Knockturn Woods.”

Peter didn’t need to be told twice. Adrenalin set deep within his speed and he shot off out of the tunnel, Allison’s cries fading away as quickly as they came. His vision is still blurred and he had to carefully side-step each turn in order to swiftly move from alley to tree to wood to street. He doesn’t think he’s ever moved so fast in his life. The fear and shame almost slowed him down, but motivated him also to be by Emily’s side. This is something he promised to himself he would never let happen to the kids. *Ever.* It was out of the question. There was a line and that has taken it too far over it.

As soon as his sight spotted the cracked sign of Knockturn Woods, he sprinted his way down there. He came to a stop when he saw figures at the end—towards a dead-end. One was large, tall and bulky; the other pressed against the wall, tiny, red hair. Peter saw nothing but red...

“*EMILY!*” he yelled desperately and ran towards them. He faintly saw the frightened face of the child which then turned into relief.

The man above her growled, shoving at Peter when he finally made it to them. He fell to the floor. “Fuck off, man. This girl is my pick.”

Peter growled dangerously and stood up again. “Get your *filthy* hands off of her. She’s nine-*fucking*-years-old, man.” He mocked him, thrusting himself forwards and prying the huge hands away from Emily’s shirt. The man grumbled a high, manic laugh and shoved at Peter, sending him to the floor again.

“Do you really think you can out-smart me, boy?” He finally let go of Emily, which was Peter's aim in the first place. He made eyes at Emily, jerking his head to the side to gesture at her. She understood and shakily walked behind him and started back up the alley. Peter hoped he would be able to fight this man off until she could safely return back to the tunnel’s.

Peter raised his fists. The man barked out a laugh. Threateningly, the man stepped forwards and grabbed the back of Peter’s hair, pulling it up so he could look straight at the man. He was starting to really irritate and anger Peter. But he must keep this up, otherwise Emily will have no time to make it back to the tunnel’s ... even worse, the man could follow her...

A small whimper made its way from Peter’s parted lips at the tug, tears building at the edge of his eyes in pain.

“You can’t come up to people and interrupt them, kid,” he ground out through his yellow teeth. “Especially when they’re in the middle of something.”

Without thinking, Peter spat in the man’s face. He didn’t back away like Peter expected. He just laughed some more as his saliva ran down his ugly face.

“You disgusting, *sick* bastard.” Venom flew from each word; the words of pure hatred for this man and anyone else who followed in the man’s footsteps. The man’s hands on his hair pulled tighter. Peter tried not to wince and continued his sharp look towards the man.

“It’s kids like you that make everybody miserable.”

With that, the man tugged again and gripped at Peter’s throat with his other, throwing him to the floor. The back of the boy’s head smacked against the wet, concrete ground and the man didn’t so much as sniff in his direction. He aimed a sore kick to Peter’s stomach and walked off.

Black dots swam before Peter’s eyes and he forced himself off the ground. He was sure to wake up

with a headache tomorrow.

From the alley, he stumbled his way out. Occasionally, he would bump into the walls, the throb at the back of his head becoming more predominant every little second. All he had to do was make it back to the tunnels where they were all safe ... where Emily will have hopefully made it back...

He did; he made it back. He just needed a drink, and he would be fine.

A small, delicate hand made of flowers took his own. Allison smiled up at him, her eyes no longer swimming in the pain they were earlier.

“Are you okay, Petey?” she asked innocently. “Emily says you saved her.”

Peter regained conscious of mind, squeezing the smaller‘s hand. “Emily?”

Allison tugged him forward, the action nearly making him stand on his own feet. “She’s okay. You saved her, like the prince did in Sleeping Beauty! Except she wasn’t asleep, and big brothers do not kiss little sisters.” She made a “Ugk” sound and managed to seat him.

Suddenly, an armful of ginger was embracing him in a tight, moral hug. He hugged back, rocking them from side-to-side. He then went up to cradle her head, something Aunt May used to do when he was sad; when he was scared; when he wanted—*needed*—a hug.

“Thank you, Peter,” whispered Emily.

Peter snuggled closer, breathing in the musky air but also nuzzling into her hair. “Are you okay?”

There was a short, rasped giggle from her. “I’m alright now ... because of you.”

That is all he needed to hear from that moment.

By the time evening rolled around, Peter promised them all that he would be back later. He managed to sneak away from Allison’s sleepy eyes and make his way towards the woods area. It was a rather stupid idea to go looking for a rucksack in the near darkness, but he didn’t have the time today.

Even as he journey’s the woods now, the itch to go back and look after the kids was driving him to a different direction. He needn’t care for the pound in his head for the moment. He focused his soul and energy on finding that damn rucksack. Not only did it possess Mr. Rogers satchel, but his red and blue hoodie for his patrolling at night time. What is he to do if he’s not stopping thieves like himself

(hypocrite)

and protecting those bullies and monsters like that man earlier? He’s nothing without that damn hoodie.

He’s nothing without Spider-Man.

Now that he thinks of it, pushing away a lose branch from an overgrown tree, he hasn’t been on patrol for the better part of a good week and a half. This is how an angel dies—slowly, they become lost of their job and no longer have control over the things that should keep them going. He’s lacking in his talent that was gifted to him.

He fails at the simplest of tasks.

It didn’t last for very long, the venture, because he was too exhausted to command his legs to move any further. He has no choice but to make his way back to the tunnel.

When he got there, the only kid awake was Emily. The others were all curled up around each-other, forming a big stack.

Mute and understanding, Peter went over to Emily and winced when laying down on the damp, hard concrete ground. Up ahead he could hear quiet chatter from others and the silent *drip* of lose pipes spilling intoxicated water.

Emily climbed into his arms, head pressed against his rising and falling chest. He possessively wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close like he did earlier. In a silent goodnight, he pressed a kiss to her hair and she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.Peter may be use to the hard, cold ground he is currently trying to sleep on, it doesn’t mean he enjoys it.

Did they really think they would let him sit idly by whilst they touched and twisted and turned the vehicle away from its oppressor? He didn’t think so; but they wouldn’t allow him to help. He vaguely remembers them dragging his withering body away from the scene, pushing him back into the ambulance they were to take May away in ... not just with her unconscious and *breathing* ... but with her in one of those dreaded black body bags.

A woman pushed down on his shoulders. He thinks she was trying to shush him but he couldn’t stop crying.

At one point, he must have started hyperventilating—desperately trying to take huge gulps of breath—something May no longer had the pride to take—because they placed an oxygen mask over his mouth.

Someone else was holding the back of his head whilst the other lay on his pounding chest, talking to him ... soothing him.

“Shh ... shh ... breath, okay? You have to breath...”

But he couldn’t. It was impossible to take in what he once found so easy to do.

This was nothing like when his parents died. He hardly remembered them. This seemed to be nothing like when Ben died because ... because he still had Aunt May.

Now ... now she's gone. And he had no one left. No one to take care of him; to talk to him; no one who can make all the hurt go away.

She’s gone ... oh God ... she’s gone!

“—tell me your name ... hear me?”

He was still breathing in the scent of Emily’s hair when he awoke. He didn’t jump nor cry. He

woke up motionless, eyes sombre to the unseeing.

The tunnel's were almost dead silent now. Only sounds that were heard was the constant *drip* of water. He could feel it at his calf. Some water was dripping onto him now. But it was still dark out —a dark blue outline with black clouds hovering above the sky. Wind continued to slap them in the face in pure evil bitterness.

Peter squeezed his eyes shut again. He felt one of the kids had curled up against his back, one leg draped over his. He could almost feel the body warmth of each kid before he drifted off again.

When he woke again, it was day time. Emily was absent from his arms as well as the other kids apart from Harry who sat up against the wall.

He sat up with a grounded groan, sliding his bum back until he hit the wall beside Harry. The little boy looked up, and Peter found he was chewing on a biscuit.

He needed water...

"Hey, bud," he croaked out, "any water?"

Harry nodded, shoving the rest of his biscuit in his mouth. He got up and toddled over to their little corner and handed Peter a bottle of half-filled, lukewarm water. With a thank you, Peter unscrewed the cap and gulped the water greedily.

"Emmy said you needed water," he said quietly, watching in wide-eyed fascination as Peter completely drained the bottle of any liquid. "You hit your head."

"That I did, young man," said Peter, sighing in relief at the wetness of his tongue and lips. How was it possible for water to have some sort of magical cure when it comes to thirst? "Where are the others, Hazza?"

Harry finished the rest of his biscuit before answering. "Out stealin' stuff. We are low on water and snacks."

Peter frowned but a smirk played on his drying lips. "I only brought you those snacks yesterday—"

"Not yesterday." Harry shook his head. "You've been asleep for a long time."

"How long?"

"Two days."

Peter coughed.

"Don't worry, Emily fed you water. I thought you died."

Peter chuckled hoarsely. He had been asleep for a good two days? That was a first. That man must have really shoved him to the floor hard enough for a concussion to linger. There was still a dull throb at the back of his skull, but he was more focused on the growling his stomach was making. It has been a good few days since he had last eaten.

He sat up, stretching and started to make his way from the tunnel.

“Where are you goin’?” asked Harry.

Peter turned briefly. “For a pee.”

Harry giggled and Peter rolled his eyes at the childish immaturity, making his way towards the woods. Later on today he was sure to meet up with Jordan and the others. Not that he wanted to. But, if he’s been asleep for a couple of days, and he hadn’t seen them before then, he’s in big trouble if he comes back with nada.

After he followed through with his business, that’s when he felt it. The feeling of being watched. He wanted to shrug it off and started making his way back to the tunnels.

But he felt the hairs on the back of his neck and his arms stand up. They prickled uncomfortably against his skin and jabbed at him to turn—*turn around.*

“Peter!” called Harry.

He couldn’t listen. Trusting his spidey-instincts, he slowly turned, a wise choice to make when all he could see were dancing little spots floating in and out of his line of sight. But before them stood a man. No ... he was hiding; hiding behind a tree. He wasn’t being too discrete ... in fact, Peter believed he was trying to be noticed on purpose. He squinted further, looking over the man’s posture and style. Greying, curly brown hair, big doe-eyes, shy smile, purple collared shirt...

(No ... no ... why can’t they just leave him alone?)

Before he could even think about wandering off, the man stepped out carefully. He seemed as if he was trying to make himself smaller as to not frighten Peter; almost as if he was a terrified, little bear cub.

“It’s okay...” He put his hand out in defence, meaning no harm. “I just wanna talk.”

Peter hesitated. No one else seemed to be with him. He couldn’t feel anyone else near the man. He was on his own.

“Peter!”

The man’s eyes darted from Harry’s to Peter’s. Smoothly, he came forwards and said, “Peter, is it? Peter...”

“Yeah.” Peter swallowed. A sweat broke out on the back of his neck. It wasn’t as if he sensed any danger with this man, but at the moment, his spidey-senses were playing and pulling him in a variety of directions. “Wh-what’s up?”

“Now, it’s okay...” He approached some more. Peter dared himself forwards. Still, no one else was behind this man. He supposed it was vaguely safe.

“Peter!” A pair of arms wrapped around his middle, nearly knocking him over by the pure force Harry extracted into the hug.

The man said nothing. Respect must run in his family because he actually backed up a little, smiling warmly as if patiently waiting to speak with Peter.

Peter leaned down, prying the small arms from around him. Harry pouted and the teen caressed his

cheeks, eyes to eyes. “Hey, I need you to stay back, okay?”

Harry nodded. “Okay.”

“I won’t be long.”

“Is that man going to hurt you?”

Peter shook his head. “No, silly thing. This is a nice man.” He has no way of telling whether this man was nice or not, but he was the only one that didn’t at least scare him a little. “You be good, okay?”

“I’ll be good.” The boy leaned up and pressed a light kiss to Peter’s cheek before toddling off, sitting down in his usual spot.

With a deep breath, Peter made his way over, keeping his feet in line and balance straight. This man is a doctor—he didn’t need any help.

“Hey...” he mumbled.

The doctor started with another smile. It comforted Peter a little.

“I want to start off by ... apologising for what happened. We didn’t mean to scare you.”

Peter nodded, kicking at a stone.

“I’ve come here for a truce.”

This caught Peter’s attention. He stopped with his kicking and looked at the man. However, he wasn’t looking at Peter. Instead, he was looking past him, but still managing a small smile.

“We wanna offer you position—”

“A position?”

The man chuckled nervously. “You seem like you need to money to feed that little boy.”

Peter cast a glance back at Harry. Luckily, he was out earshot. He was staring at them with childish curiosity and when seeing they were both looking at him, he stuck his tongue out at the doctor.

Embarrassed, Peter turned back around, mumbling an apology. He also answered a simple, “Yes,” to answer the man’s rhetorical question. He wasn’t going to mention all the other kids.

“Well, we have a solution,” continued the man. “You could work some. Anything particular you’re good at?”

Peter wanted to sarcastically ask where this man was going with this. He didn’t have to tell him anything. And what was in for it? For Peter to bring Mr. Rogers’ satchel back where it belonged?

...

Fair enough, but he’s being a little upfront.

“If you don’t wanna do it today—”

“No, no!” Peter gulped, heat rising upon his cheeks. The man stared at him, silently urging him to

go on. “I ... uh ... science?” He mentally smacked himself. It didn’t have to come out like a question, did it? He was good at science, pure and simple. “I-I’m good at s-science and maths.”

The man’s small smile turned into a huge grin, eyes sparkling. “That’s brilliant! Anything of interest?”

Peter—though he would never admit it—was starting to like this man. He even couldn’t help the tiny smirk that played on his lips before it was gone again. “I like inventing things. Fixing things. Building things.”

“Even better!” he exclaimed. “You would fit right in.”

“Really?”

“Definitely.” There was a short pause. “Whenever you want. Now could ... be ideal. You could even spend the night...?”

Peter knew this was coming. He’s definitely starting to trust the doctor. A lot more than he was with the others. There may be a little there for Mr. Rogers, but absolutely none for Mr. Stark. But the doctor ... he approached him carefully, quietly, like an animals’ observer. He spoke rationally and gave him something to offer in return of the satchel. And did he mention money at all? He could actually not only get some food and water for this kids, but his friends as well.

“Would I be allowed back here?” he asked cautiously.

The man nodded enthusiastically, his curls bouncing slightly. “Of course, bud—whenever you want.”

Another silence followed them; though not awkward, it was tense. Awaiting any kind of answer fell silent from Peter’s lips. He couldn’t.

The selfish side of him wanted to spend the night ... to get to know the compound. Maybe even start on something. In the meantime, he could build more spider fluid for his web-shooters easily. With the equipment just within his grip, it would be a greater chance to protect the kids and to protect helpless people. However, the other side of him screamed to stay with the kids. They won’t be protected. Not right now; he couldn’t cuddle Emily, calm Allison down from a nightmare, tease Thomas, tell stories to Harry and discuss useless dreams and intellect with Millicent.

Come on, Peter.

“Now?” he said quietly.

“Sorry?”

He stood straighter, more confident, though he didn’t feel it.

“I would like to come now. Stay the night, see how it feels? I can start whenever you are comfortable.”

The doctor’s face became more impossibly brighter. “Whatever you’re comfortable with, buddy. And if you’re okay to do today, I will gladly take you now. Would you like that.”

With one last look at Harry, a small goodbye waiting to happen, he nodded at the man.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so much for your support and patience with this fic!

kudos to you all! <33

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony couldn't help but groan and collapse into his chair as soon as he heard that Bruce had brought the kid back to the compound. No ... he wasn't frustrated about that, because he knew Bruce was going to bring the kid back (if the kid had accepted). It was the fact Bruce had stupidly offered a place to sleep for this kid.

"What is *wrong* with him?!" he burst out to Bucky who was casually sitting on top of his desk, sipping some ... was that tea?

"*Pfft,*" shrugged Bucky. "The kid needed a place to stay."

"The kid has the *streets* to stay," he ground out, flailing his arms in the air.

"Look," Bucky put his cup down, dangerously close to the keyboard, "I'm not happy about it too, okay? This is Steve's happy place we're taking about, and that kid took it away."

Tony scoffed. "I thought his happy place is when he's blissfully bent over the desk for you."

Bucky rolled his eyes. "Why is it that every time we do much as look at each-other, people automatically sail us?"

"What?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

Bucky frowned. "Sail? Isn't that the saying?"

"You mean ship?"

Bucky flipped him off at Tony's smirk.

They settled into silence again. Bucky went back to his tea and Tony traced his index finger along the worktop. After a short moment, Tony spoke again.

"What are you even doing in here?" he asked. "When did you become interested in my depressing life choices?"

"Exactly why I came here. Because it's entertaining."

"You have a T.V. for that."

"True, but I finished Stranger Things and Bates Motel. Nothing else I can find."

Tony was just about ready to shove Bucky off of the desk whilst suggesting Brooklyn 99—tea in hand and everything—until the door to the office opened. They both turned like deer caught in headlights and in walked Bruce. Behind him, a lost puppy more or less, was the boy. He walked in, head slightly down, light curls falling over his eyes—anything to avoid looking at them—with his shoulders slightly hunched; his steps were ragged, as if he was exhausted of any sort of interaction, whether that be physically or mentally.

"Brucie-Bear!" greeted Tony in mock happiness. "How nice of you to bring the kid along. What is he to steal today?"

The kid winced but did nothing else. This earned a kick from Bucky, which, must he add, is quite forceful. Then again, Bucky is never one to be gentle.

Bruce decided to ignore Tony and walked along. The kid followed after him, keeping close but not so much touching; it was a certain distance the kid allowed himself to go.

“I have allowed him to work in the lab,” said Bruce. It was said in such a monotone way that Tony was taken aback. A pin dropped, it was so quiet. A pulse of Bucky’s own silent anger mixing with confusion beat into the back of Tony’s head.

Silent. Too silent.

“Why?” said Bucky. He was biting back his tongue to not spit at any insult that may follow from that mouth.

“Well, quite the knowledgeable person, aren’t you Bucky?”

If it were a different situation, Tony would have laughed in Bucky’s face. Though the false fact in a false fact, it is still quite funny. But, even Tony didn’t understand what Bruce was trying to get at. He decided the best of the best is to sit still and allow Bruce to go through with what he to suggest in this ... dire circumstance.

“Why would the kid find Cap’s satchel with no motivation? Apparently he’s good and math and science ... it’s an opportunity for him.”

Tony snorted.

Bucky decided to voice Tony’s thoughts, it seemed. “I’m sorry, but, what? I don’t think my intelligence has anything to do with this, Greenie. You gotta give some sense here.”

“Have you read the Maze Runner?” asked Tony.

Bucky shook his head. “I’ve watched it. Plus, it fits Doc perfectly.”

Bruce snapped his fingers, gaining the two’s attention. “Hey, *hey,* listen!” His eyes were boring into Tony’s, almost dangerous looking. “I’m not asking you to throw a party for the kid. Nor am I asking for you to accept him. But for the love of Thor, treat him with respect.”

They stayed silent. Tony heard Bucky murmur something, and he himself just nodded mutely.

Bruce gestures the kid along and he followed. A rising pit of disgust was settling a place in Tony’s stomach, but he tried to ignore it. He didn’t want a scolding from Bruce—he can be quite scary. They came up to Tony and the kid still refused to look anywhere but Tony or anyone for a fact.

“I need you to take him down to the lab and show him where he is gonna work—”

“I don’t understand,” interrupted Tony, holding a hand up to stop Bruce from talking. “Why me? And second, what is the kid exactly gonna be working on? So what if he’s good at science and math?”

“He told me.”

“*Oh*.” There was a scoff from Bucky. “He told you, did he? Are we gonna believe everything he says now?”

Bruce opened his mouth to speak but Tony beat him to it. “I’m sorry Bruce, but I’m on Buckaroo’s

side in this sticky situation. How do you know he's not just scrounging our money to prostitute young girls and buy drugs for the meaner men?"

"*Tony!*" Bruce gasped and his eyes trailed down to the kid's. Tony was surprised that the kid was now looking at him. That ghost was once again there; this child committing crimes was more than meets the eye. And there is nothing there but a phantom.

A small smirk—that never sparkles at the edge of the kid's eyes—rose on his face. "I -I may sell drugs; many of them, actually."

Tony was not expecting that. Neither was Bruce nor Bucky. His voice was croaky, a bit broken and wishy-washy to say the least. It sounded like he had been smoking for years. The dryness on his cracked lips proved he hadn't any nutrients for a long time and Tony suddenly felt guilty. Once again, these emotions were dangerously fluctuating; he was getting too old for this.

"But - but there is one th-thing I don't do is sell girl's body's to perverts. Pure and - and simple." The boy stepped back, crossing his arms over his chest with an embarrassed flush glowing on his gaunt cheeks.

They all sat in stunned silence. With his bout of confidence, Tony not only became surprised, but impressed as well. Not many dared stand up to him, but he guessed when he is throwing out false accusations at others they had the right to prove him wrong. He just wasn't expecting it from this skittish, stuttering boy.

"You're in kid." Tony's voice cut the tense air. "That's brave of you. But I'd wash your mouth more often." Reaching over, Tony was about to place an arm around the kid's shoulder, but then made the wise choice not to. His mind's excuse was that the kid was dirty, but Tony's had much dirtier people on him than the kid. The heart pounding in his chest told him that the kid would not take so kindly to physical affection from an adult; an adult that had just insulted him to high hell at that. Not once now, but twice. Who's to say he won't do it a thrice time?

"So, he's working in the lab?" said Bucky.

"Looks like it," replied Tony, placing his hands on his hips. The kid again was looking down at the floor, finding his own trainer-clad feet rather interesting. "What is he good at, Bruce?"

"Building, fixing, numbers, technology." Bruce had somewhat a proud smile on his lips; the kid was a geeky-nerd, just like them. "He'll fit right in."

"Think we can make another Ultron with his brain?"

"*No.*"

Tony turned to the kid and mockingly thrust his arm out and place his straight palm either side of his shoulders. He pretended to ignore the flinch the boy gave away when he did this. "Well, kid, looks like you're working with the Avengers now. How does that make you feel?" Tony didn't give him a time to answer when he went onto his next question, "What is your name?"

"Peter..." whispered the boy.

"Peter, neat. Right, follow me then."

Bucky whined behind him. "What am I supposed to do without you here?"

"Bucky, it's not a good time to cheat on Steve—"

"*Shut the fuck up—*"

"But you can go and help Natasha train. She's been practising so hard just so she can beat that damn arm of yours."

There was a huff and Bucky was walking passed them. He turned around, his dark hair dramatically flying around with his body. "It's been, what? —two years now and you have all not learned that my arm is basically unbreakable? It's made of vibranium, so it's unwillingly going to break for you or the others." With that, he strut from the room, earning a small laugh from Bruce and Tony telling after him, "Rocket will exchange that arm in your sleep for a helium one!"

Another bout of silence then took a hold of the room. Tony decided it was then appropriate to guide the kid away from the office and actually go down to the lab.

"Are you coming, Bear?" asked Tony, waving his arms at the kid to go to the door.

Bruce rolled his eyes at the common nickname and shook his head. "No. It's my day off now, isn't it? You have fun with Peter."

Tony grunted in response which earned a scolding look from Bruce. He smiled childishly and went towards the door.

Peter was waiting outside, chewing on his finger nails and the skin around his dirty fingers. Tony cringed and purposely slammed the office door shut, startling the small boy.

"Right, kid, follow me," he said in a gruff voice.

It's only then, when Peter walked slightly behind him, that Tony's notice how short the kid was. Maybe it was because he was just a teenager

(what? —sixteen? —seventeen?)

or the fact that living on the streets with no proper foods and lack of clean water effected his growth spurt? Maybe Tony was overthinking this a bit as he pressed the lift button to take them down towards the lab. But he was a good few inches shorter than Tony; though he would never admit it, he is quite short as well. But this boy takes the cake.

Peter stood awkwardly, again, chewing at his fingers, eyes wandering the corridors in fascination. The lift binged and they both stepped inside. Tony pressed the button to the ground floor and thanked himself that he had sold Avengers Tower, because it would have taken many floors to get to the lab. As they were already on the second floor, it took three more floors before they were underground in the lab.

"Are we underground?" asked Peter timidly.

Tony raised an eyebrow at him, nodding. "Yeah ... why?"

Peter just shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

Tony saw the little white-lie there. The kid was somewhat a bit frightened at the concept of being underground. Enclosed spaces most frighten the boy, but Tony couldn't really bring himself to care. If he is to work here, he needs to pull himself together.

"Right, I suppose you could work quietly over here." Tony pointed to a high desk with stools. No such equipment was laid upon that table but that is soon to change. He would give kids

assignments to do, things Tony normally has no time to do.

Peter followed Tony's hand and went over to the table. It's the that Tony noticed the kid didn't even have a backpack with him. He was just empty handed. And what was it that Bucky said earlier?

"He's staying the night, insisted by Bruce."

Tony groaned inwardly, careful not to startle the kid. What is it that Bruce likes about this kid so much? There are plenty of other homeless teenagers out there, why is this one any different? In his head, he tells himself he shouldn't be too harsh. There must be something going on with the kid that only Bruce and the teen know about that he doesn't know. Whatever it was, it is frustrating him.

He found that the kid was awkwardly standing by the tall chair, his fingers tangling themselves together.

"Kid, you can sit down," said Tony. He decided to occupy himself by finding tasks for the boy to do. He scrambled his way through many sheets of paper, finding something quite simple for Peter to do. He was only a kid after all—genius or not, Tony imagines it's been quite a long time since the kid has been at school. "Kid?" Tony turned around.

Peter was sat up at the stool, tracing lines on the table with his hand. He looked up when Tony called to him. The outlines of the grit and dirt on his cheeks were days old, Tony notes. If the kid is going to sleep at the compound tonight, he would have to first take a shower. Maybe to show a little gratitude for helping out in the future, he could wash the boy's clothes as well.

"I'm gonna give you..." He trailed off, flipping through some papers again. "What are you most interested in?"

He heard the boy, his voice high and broken. "I-Uh ..." He saw him visibly swallow, like he had a dry throat. "Um, I-I — I'm better at fixing ... fixing things, I guess?"

If this was anyone else, Tony's patience would have run out. However, he couldn't find it in him to get annoyed at the kid. After all, he was just a kid; homeless, at that, and working in the same area as an incredibly rich person must be wonderfully daunting, even in Tony's mind.

"Fixing things, yeah?" Tony filed through more papers. He came across one he started to look for —it was part of a gadget to make one of his A.I.s work—an A.I. he was not planning on making. He had plenty of others, but that can never be enough, and he can never be too careful. The wires in hand were cut off from their supplies, if plugged in, they would be sparking the gates of hell. Quite the small but dangerous work, and Tony considered handing this to the kid.

Easily, Tony could fix this with no instructions; it was his own invention. And his memory could hold up to hundreds to thousands of information a day. This was the same with Bruce and even Natasha and Clint; maybe even Bucky could come into the mix when in Winter Soldier mode. The kid, though, may be different. After all, as they keep on implying: kid, a boy, nothing more than a teenager going through the last stages of puberty. (Or in this boy's case, the early stages).

Taking the risk, he waltzed over and later the rectangular mess of wires and fabrics to join onto the soon-to-be A.I.

Steadily, Peter picked up some of the wires, inspecting them with the squint of his eyes. Then, those lovely, doe-innocent eyes took a glance at Tony, questioning him.

“This, kid, is the birth of a new A.I.,” he explained smoothly—a little smug. “This baby is a bit like F.R.I.D.A.Y.—depending what gender you want.” He picked up a red wire, shoving it in the boy’s face, voice low. “Red wire requires more soul energy. Do you have any idea of the makings of this?”

It was like a test. And Tony hoped the kid was smart enough to realise this.

“The level of ... of energy?” The kid’s voice shook. It reminded Tony when he was on the edge of an anxiety; he hoped this kid was alright to work. They couldn’t just shove him out. “Um, it boots the gener—“ he gulped, “generating system. Helps it ... uh, it h-helps it talk—“

“*Stop stuttering,*” Tony snapped. The kid flinched. “This ain’t gonna get you anywhere, kid.” He places the wire down, going back to his own desk, back to the boy. “If you know what’s good for you, I would start work, okay? The instructions come within the mind of the brain. And we have no paper work here. All in the head.”

It was a little brash. But Tony couldn’t help it. The way he was raised was to teach his own mind and exercise the fingers he was blessed with at birth.

It was best if he left his back for Peter to stare at. And he knew the kid was looking at him. His pure and desperate energy radiating from one end of the room to the other. He couldn’t listen. And he couldn’t look. Each drop of guilt that set a tool on his heart strings just hurt more and more. Maybe this is because he helped the kid and ... and he repaid Tony by hurting one of his friends.

(He knew the kid wouldn’t have known, and yes, he is stealing on the instinct to survive, but it was still wrong—can he not go to Child Protection Services? It would give him the best opportunities. If Bruce tells Tony the truth of a seemingly smart kid, then why did the boy waste the chance of an education?)

Tony worked. He forced his head down, fingers tapping vigorously on the keypad whilst he downed the coffee he had occupied at his side. F.R.I.D.A.Y. spoke only few words to him every couple of minutes. If Tony cocked up a little (which was unusual) or if he wasn’t paying attention enough. He made sure to program Friday in the ear piece he was currently wearing so the kid could snoop in on what his and his A.I. is speaking of.

It wasn’t until the time in the corner of the screen flashed at 1:30 p.m. did Tony turn back to the boy. He had been deathly quiet the whole time. The only sounds emitting from his direction was soft little screws and squeaks of the boy most likely fixing and putting together the AI with immense difficulty.

However, when Tony turned and wandered over, he not only found the kid had collapsed onto the table in front of him, but he held a half-newly constructed A.I. in his small, nimble fingers. He must have fallen asleep, which Tony sighed irritably at. Although, the half completed A.I. impressed him for him to almost forget that the kid was splayed across the work table.

With stiff, aching fingers, Tony reached out and shook the kid gently. But the boy didn’t move.

“Kid, wake up, c’mon.” Tony shook him again. Just as he was about to finally try something more domineering, the boy shifted and let out a small—adorable—yawn. He let the half-created AI slip from his fingers as he stretched, again yawning. “Kid? You awake, there?” A tiny smile crossed the man’s lips before he set them in a straight line, shaking his head.

The boy looked around and his eyes—glazed and lethargic—locked onto the Stark. He blushed, mumbling an apology.

“Yeah, it’s not very professional to sleep on the job, kid.” Tony shook his head. All the anger from earlier had thankfully ebbed away, so his second-hand oppressive nature was no longer on display. Instead, it was replaced by his more calm and tired self. “I bet you’re hungry?”

At the mention of ‘hungry’, the boy’s eyes picked up the light from around the room. It almost made Tony prone to a small smile again.

He wondered when the kid had last eaten. And it didn’t take him very long to find out.

He gestured with his head to follow him out. Slowly ... almost too slowly did the kid descend himself from the chair. He followed after him. Barley before they were even from the door, he heard:

“M-Mr. Stark?”

Tony turned, a bit thrown off guard at the boy actually addressing him, considering his own malicious behaviour from before. But he was quick to see the kid’s sickly, pale face before his eyes rolled up into the back of head. With a cringe-worthy *thump*, the boy faint towards the floor, legs giving out from beneath him.

At first, Tony was in half-surprise, not knowing what to do. Until his brain finally caught up to his sight and realised the the eyes rolling into the back of the boy’s head told the Stark the boy was dehydrated. And the negative outlet this boy had for food was probably another reason too.

He couldn’t just leave the kid here on the hard, marbled ground whilst he contacted Bruce or anyone near the floor at the moment. It seemed too cruel, even for Tony.

He was just a fucking kid—

Without another thought, Tony side-stepped over the kid and braces his hands under the smaller’s arms, lifting him towards Tony’s chest. (Why was it people were heavier when unconscious)? The boy flopped, chin to chest, no help for Tony at all. But he needed water and food. Water at most, and he needed it now. There was no way Tony could drag this kid to the lift. He would have to carry him.

Grunting at the weight—though a skinny, little runt, he was still heavy—Tony managed himself to lift Peter into his arms, carrying him. One arm was under Peter’s back with the other hooked under his knees. Tony hugged out slightly, making sure the kid’s head didn’t dangle over his arm. So, in the mind-set of little panic, Tony brought the kid back towards his chest so the kid’s head now flopped onto his shoulder.

He walked, trying to keep balance and stepping into the lift.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y., take me to the medical bay.”

“As you wish, boss.”

That’s what he loved about his A.I.s—no questions asked unless absolutely necessary.

The lift doors shut and Tony was left to continue struggling to hold the kid. Though he was lighter than a teenager should be...

It came to no shocker that the kid’s grime and dirt stuck to his skin like mud would on a dog’s dried fur. It all looked days old, maybe even weeks, and the smell that issued from the boy wasn’t actually a horrible smell. Faintly, he could smell the stink of weed and other drugs Tony had

probably regretfully once drowned himself in. But the others released a woody, winter smell which Tony found quite comforting. Pine cones and dew-drop grass scented the hair that warmed Peter's head.

This kid ... he looked even more breakable and innocent when passed out. Tony could feel the guilt continue to toy at his heart strings. Aside from that came pride for the kid as well. And how in the hell he had managed to survive on the streets. From Tony's perspective and knowledge, he seemed to of been in the street's for a long time.

The ding of the lift snapped Tony from his thoughts and there stood Bruce, being informed by F.R.I.D.A.Y. that Tony was coming up.

Bruce's eyes widened as he put on his glasses.

"What happened?" he demanded as he took Peter from Tony's arms.

Tony spluttered to explain, slightly out of breath and a bit distraught to have the kid ripped from his arms when he was the one who saw the boy fall. "H-He just passed out, Bruce. Dehydration and starvation; he's been deprived of it too long."

As he said this, Bruce laid the boy down on a bed, covered with white sheets that the kid's clothe's were sure to stain. He checked his forehead then down to his cheeks and pulse behind his ear. Then, the doctor rushed to grab a drop. That's when others burst in, Doctor Cho among them. They had also been notified.

Tony stepped back for the privacy and respect needed to care for the small boy.

He never left, though.

After good ten minutes, the three doctor's, including Cho, left Bruce to it. It was nothing too serious, Cho had said. He was severely starved, that's for sure. And he hadn't been drinking enough water. Was it safe to mention that he also had a urine infection? Tony didn't want to dwell on that, so shook his head when overhearing Bruce and Cho discussing it as a potential threat for not drinking enough—or worse, drinking the wrong sort of water. Tony was thankful that Cho and the other doctors didn't care to ask any questions of a young boy in the care of their hands. She smiled politely at Tony, but gave him that look that he would have to explain himself later.

Finally, it was just him, the kid and Bruce.

"How is he?" asked Tony.

Bruce had forced a good cup of water down the kid's throat before reattaching the drop to his arm.

"He's okay now. Just needs a few hours rest. His stomach is small, Tony. Like, really small and constricted for a child. Hence why I've added the drop. If he eats too much, it won't stay down. I did, however, find something interesting in his blood."

Tony listened on, curiosity taking its tool.

"It wasn't anything I have seen in a boy his age, that's for sure. But it wasn't human."

The Stark raised an eyebrow, eyes taking a quick glance at Peter before looking back at Bruce. "Are you trying to tell me he's a mutant?" It couldn't be possible. A mongrel wouldn't be able to survive out on the streets. With their ambiguous metabolism, it just isn't possible...

Bruce only sighed in response and shrugged. Then, he spoke, deciding it be best to answer as much as possible for Tony instead of just leaving the genius hanging. "I'm not sure what it is, but all I know is that he hasn't eaten in a good week. And for someone with the metabolism as high as I can see on this kid, he needs at least three solid meals a day which includes plenty of energy snacks in between. Not to mention the pressure of downing a load of water a day."

"What are you suggesting, Bruce?"

"That the kid spends as much time here as he possibly can."

That's it. Bruce left Tony in the room with the teen, saying a simple, "Come and fetch me when he wakes."

And only did he once disobey Bruce's order a good couple of hours later.

"You awake, kiddo?"

Was he ever going to professionally address Peter by his name?

Peter forced his eyes to open, a small whimper sounding from the back of his throat.

"Hey, no, it's okay." Tony found himself shushing the boy, pushing him gently to lie back down again. "Stay here. I'll get Bruce and he'll fix you up."

"Where are they?" mumbled Peter incoherently.

Tony gave him a confused look. "Where's who?"

Peter glanced up in panic, his hands scratching at where the drip started. "The kids? Emily, where is she?"

Emily...? Tony shook his head. "There is no Emily, bud."

Before Peter could do so much as rip the drip from his arm, Tony caught him, careful not to leave any bruises on the kid—because, come on, his skin was so pale and delicate like a baby's that the bruises Tony sees now are not convincing him that it's just a simple bump into a wall.

"They need me," he said helplessly. He looked as if he were about to cry, yet able to push the tears stubbornly back.

"You're staying in the compound overnight, kid. It's now late afternoon, and if you want a comfortable bed to sleep in, I suggest you calm down so Bruce can get you out of here as soon as possible."

And with that, Peter obeyed, lying back down with a defeated, submissive sigh. Didn't the kid even know how much torture he's putting his little, teen body through? Obviously not, because the eyes that stared worryingly at the ceiling as Tony left shone with worry for someone else. Not himself.

Chapter End Notes

do leave comments and kudos! they really motivate me to write more!! :) <3

thank you again for being so patient, as i do suck when it comes to updates xD

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peter didn't fall back asleep. He stared up at the ceiling and on occasion decided to rest his eyes. Mr. Stark, to his surprise, stayed by him for a rather long time. Though, neither of them spoke. But the whole time, Peter could feel the man's eyes on him.

Eventually, the man, Doctor Banner his name is, came in, telling Peter he was okay to go. Not before taking out the drip and giving him a bottle of pills.

"That's got to stay with you. Take two every night, okay?"

Peter was going to question why he needed them. But then he realised he was wearing different trousers than before. Well, a whole new different pair of clothing.

With his ripped jeans (that had been soaked through, he now remembers) and black hoodie gone, he was left in a long-sleeved, plain t-shirt and comfortable jogging bottoms. He felt a tint of embarrassment for managing to wet himself earlier, but it faded away, because it seemed like no one here made a huge deal about it. Also, he was too far gone to care. He guesses the pills were for something he wasn't exactly aware of.

By the time Doctor Banner led him out with Mr. Stark strolling in front of them, he found the time on Doctor Banner's watch read 6:46 p.m. He didn't know exactly how long he had been lazing in that bed, but that drip did wonders. It wasn't enough to fill the hole in his stomach, but he felt less light-headed and more alert.

"W-where are we going?" he asked timidly.

"Get some food for you, kid," said Mr. Stark, not looking back at him and Doctor Banner.

Peter lowered his head, cheeks burning in shame. This shouldn't be him ... the kids should be here.

Doctor Banner and Mr. Stark led him into the main living room where he was the day before. Or rather, a few days before. It gave him a shudder of memory, knowing that that was the day ... he shook his head. He couldn't think of that. He had to clear his mind of the stealing and assault.

"Sit," commanded Tony, pointing to a bar stool. Peter complied, ducking his head under Tony's hard gaze. Doctor Banner shot Tony a glare and made his way to the fridge.

"Is there anything particular you like, Peter?" asked Doctor Banner politely. Peter definitely preferred him to Tony a lot more.

"W-whatever you make i-is fine..." Peter hunched his shoulders, bringing his hand up to bite at his nail. These two men were terribly intimidating. And the fact they know he has stolen—one of their friends things at that—just makes him seem more of an abomination than normal.

Doctor Banner shrugged and started pulling various ingredients out. Mr. Stark sat on the stool, two away from Peter and pulled out his phone. Peter sat and stared, drinking in the awkward silence apart from Doctor Banner moving objects around. Someone chose that perfect time to struck up a conversation—a man, dark-skinned, walked in along with another whom he had seen with Mr. Stark earlier.

“Yo, what’s *this* little pipsqueak doing’ here?” the man walked over and ruffled Peter’s hair. He flinched back, running his hands over the curls, straightening them out, even though they’re made of grease.

“He’s staying over night,” grunted the man with the metal arm. If Peter were more comfortable around them, he would have happily awed over that arm.

“Ah, shit. He ain’t gonna take my wallet this time.” The two men snorted and Peter lowered his gaze. If he had no self control, he would have just up and left. But this is his fault. He needs to embrace the karma and bullying he has coming his way.

Doctor Banner came over and laid a hand on Peter’s shoulder, squeezing with reassurance. “Sam, Bucky, this is Peter.”

The dark-skinned man snorted again, picking up and egg and tossing it into the air, much to Doctor Banner’s dismay. “Peter? Simple name.”

“Careful Sam, don’t let Quill hear you say that,” said Mr. Stark.

“It’s not one you’d hear from a child thief, at least.”

“*Enough!*” Doctor Banner finally put his foot down, drowning the room into silence. “This has got to stop.”

“You’ve said that ten times already,” Mr. Stark murmured. Unfortunately, Doctor Banner heard. Peter did not like that look.

It was the sort of look a dad gives you when you’ve just about stepped over line. And Peter is thinking of a nonchalant kind of dad, like Uncle Ben was. That was until Peter gave him some attitude, did he give Peter that look.

He walked over to Mr. Stark. Peter shrunk back, afraid of what was to happen. He was sure he saw a faded green spark tingle at his neck and the tips of his fingers; it still lingers, even as he comes face to face with Mr. Stark. The other man stood up, an unamused straight-lipped from on his face. Doctor Banner had to look up slightly, but Peter was surprised Mr. Stark wasn’t backing down from the Doctors’ sudden dominating domineer.

“I’m not really sure where any of you guys’ empathy has gone, but if you haven’t noticed, he is a *child*.” He stepped back, sending his death-stare to everyone in (apart from Peter) in the room. “And a child needs to survive in order to save others.” He pointed at Peter, hand shaking, “You can tear him down, brick by brick, but without any work and money, this kid is going to be screwed over worse off than what you all can lay on him.”

With that said, Doctor Banner stepped back and went back to making a little meal for them. A stunned silence stood its ground and now did Mr. Stark look a little subdued and sat his ass back down on the stall. Sam stayed quiet and grabbed an apple, noisily chewing on it. Bucky grunted, walking from the room.

Peter entertained himself by following the tiny patterns on the work top. He even tried spelling out certain names and sentences. He could just about see his horrid complexion in the counter top, cringing at himself.

“Hey, kid,” Mr. Stark spoke, startling everyone. It echoed painfully around the huge room. It only made Peter feel even more self conscious about being there.

“Kid? You listening?” Mr. Stark snapped his fingers in front of his face.

“*Tony*, *I swear to God—*”

“Calm your tits, Bruce, I was gonna offer him something.”

This caught Peter’s attention. He looked up, shoulders still brought in towards his chest and hair flopping lazily over his eyes.

“I’d say you could do with a good bath? don’t ya’ think?”

Another red shading rose on Peter’s cheeks. Opposite him, Sam laughed around his apple. Only did he stop when he earned a hard glare from Doctor Banner. Mr. Stark came over, a little smug smirk on his lips. Peter backed up a little.

“Hey, it’s okay. There’s no need for molestation here.”

Peter heard Doctor Banner sigh in defeat. This time, he needn’t snap at Mr. Stark. Mainly because he knew it was useless. Mr. Stark wasn’t afraid of Doctor Banner, and perhaps Peter shouldn’t be. Although he definitely trusts Doctor Banner the most, there is something about him that just doesn’t sit right in Peter’s brittle bones. The anger, the raised voice a contrast from his normal shy one and the green tinge he seemed to be developing on his body. Almost like a cartoon character on a little T.V. show when they become sick and their faces turn an ugly shade of green.

Mr. Stark reached out cautiously. Peter only eyed him suspiciously—not giving him any permission at all, kind you—Mr. Stark let his hands touch at Peter’s unruly curls before he full-on spread his fingers to run them through his hair, pushing them back, away from his face.

"Oh yeah," said Bucky.

Mr. Stark took them out all-too-soon. Peter found himself wanting the man to do it again. It was in an attempt to shower him in affection, right? Not that it was a rain of sentiment ... just a way to let himself escape the guilt of hurting Peter multiple times since they met.

“You could use a shower, bath, whatever. I don’t need to know. But I can tell you, that hair hasn’t been washed in months.”

“Trust me, I can see that from here," said Sam.

Peter scrunched up his nose in disgust. Do these men have any empathy?

(Why would they? You’re a thief).

He stood up from the stool, fingers digging into the plain t-shirt he has on. A glare scooted from his feet to Sam.

“*You’re such* an *asshole*.”

This time, it was time for Doctor Banner to laugh. Even Bucky and Mr. Stark laughed, as if they didn't believe a work Peter had just said. Mr. Stark patted his hand behind Peter’s back and pushed him forwards.

“What are you doing?” questioned Doctor Banner, looking up from chopping up some vegetables. The sight made Peter’s mouth water.

“He’s taking the princess for a bath,” commented Sam.

“That’s right,” said Mr. Stark. He still had his hand gently in the middle of Peter’s back. The comfort was almost there. *Almost.*

“Your Royal Highness is taken the peasant for a bath," said Sam.

“You talk t-t ... too much,” snarked Peter.

“You tell ‘im, Pete,” said Mr. Stark happily. “Maybe we can teach me, a billionaire, to take things from shops without making the sector beep.”

Peter didn’t hear anything from Bruce. Not until he was completely out of the room. Sounds as if Sam is in really big trouble ... Mr. Stark will likewise be later.

Mr. Stark finally took his hand away, a small yawn emitting from his mouth. He looked down at Peter and the boy looked away, straight ahead of himself.

“I gotta say kid, you got guts,” said Mr. Stark. He sounded proud. A little chuckle even proved that. “To stand up for yourself, especially in front of a load of adults, is one serious approach.”

“Is th-this a test?” Peter still trained his eyes in front of him. He scuffed at the edge of his t-shirt, almost bringing the sleeves up to chew at the ends. Remembering these clothes art at his, he managed to control his actions and stop before it became too late. “Because if it’s a test, it’s a p-pretty douchey thing to do.”

“Kid, you’re passing alright.” He stopped them, looking Peter right in the eye. “But learn to take a joke.”

Oh, how Peter wanted to seriously smack that smug grin off of Mr. Stark’s face. He again asks himself how he ever looked up to this man. The man that had actually once saved his life years and years ago. The thought put a lump in Peter’s throat. This man is no hero. Without that suit he’s just an imbecile, self-centred asshole.

“It’s no joke t-talking about drugs.”

“I know that kid. But if you’re gonna stick around here, with people that despise you, you gotta learn to take the heat.”

Now Mr. Stark’s voice was raising on borderline frustration. Peter left his comments to himself and followed the Stark from a little behind. He glared a hole into the back of the man’s head.

They crossed the corner and came into a long hallway filled with doors. Mr. Stark cleared his throat and slowed his steps so Peter could keep beside him. The silence was deafening and Peter had the urge to strike up a silly, little conversation until Mr. Stark beat him to it.

"There are many rooms, I know," he started. He again placed a hand at the small of Peter's back, urging him forwards. "You're staying the night, and that doesn't mean just once. But around here, you follow my rules." He stopped them again, staring down at Peter with all his fury-might. He looked like an angry bear, waiting to devour the young pup threatening to attack it's cubs. Peter didn't know why Mr. Stark's mood fluctuated like the temperatures in New York, but one thing he has decided is that he does not like Tony Stark. "And when you disobey those rules, you will not like what happens."

Peter stepped back slightly. He made sure to never break the glare he held on Mr. Stark, every bone in his body burning with irritation. All he wanted to do was make a better life for his kids, and Mr. Stark is making it incredibly difficult for him to lay his feet to rest on this expensive carpet.

"Do you understand me, kid?"

Peter nodded. His lips were pressed together to keep his profanities to himself. Instead, he settled with a simple, "I understand, sir."

Mr. Stark grimaced a smile before turning around, right arm spreading wide in front of him. "This shall be your room." As if he couldn't get even more melodramatic, he made a smooth entrance of taking out a key and unlocking the door.

A cold breeze ruffled their hair. Peter shivered, curling in on himself as Mr. Stark entered the room. Peter allowed himself a few seconds to regain himself before following after the older man. He let a little gasp fall from his lips when he saw the size of the desolated room. It must have been as big as his old room and Aunt May and Uncle Ben's room combined—maybe even a little bigger.

Mr. Stark let him go in front, wide eyes exploring every inch of the room.

The walls were a dark blue and the soft, touch-starved carpet a lighter colour of grey. A double bed sat by the wall next to window with no curtains. The bed was vacant of any sheets or covers for that matter. But when he heard ruffling behind him and found Mr. Stark holding a pile of sheets and a huge duvet. It seemed as if this would be the first time this bed would be slept in.

Peter ducked his head and took the sheets from Tony, stumbling a bit at the weight. At his tremor, Mr. Stark laid a gentle hand across his shoulder, leading him forward until Peter dropped the covers on the fresh bed. He let his cold hand wipe at his brow, once again feeling a dizzy spell break at his mind.

"Hey, kid? Don't faint on me again, okay?"

"I'm sorry..."

Peter didn't really understand himself; what was he apologising for exactly? It seemed as if Mr. Stark thought the same.

"What are you saying sorry for, kid? It's not your fault you can't feed yourself properly." His voice faded toward the end, it becoming a mumbling mess. "You take a bath, alright? The suite is there." His shaking hand pointed to another door and Peter chocked on a laugh, gaping at the Stark.

"Whoa..." he awed. "I get my own bathroom?"

Mr. Stark cleared his throat, a twitch of a smile trying to force its way onto his face. It disappeared again. "A bathroom you are renting, yes. I suggest you clean up before dinner."

Peter was dizzied by the hand that suddenly ruffled his curls playfully. Before he could get any more words out, Mr. Stark was out the door as fast as a lightning bolt. Peter couldn't help feel the longing of Uncle Ben when the man used to mess up his hair as a kid. The touch was familiar, and it put Peter at slight ease. He didn't exactly know what to do with his clothes. He supposed he was to put them back on after his bath.

He entered the bathroom and another delighted gasp broke his voice.

Lights switched to a white-light automatically much to Peter's joy. A shower stood in the far corner with clear-windows. On Peter's right was a large bath tub, shined and newly cleaned. The toilet stood behind the door and the sink in front of the bath with a mirror, white-lights shining around it like a movie star's mirror.

The switches for the shower looked more like a rubix cube than the bath ones. Plus, Mr. Stark and Doctor did suggest a bath rather than a shower. He supposed he should treat himself.

As he worked the bath and placed the plug in the drain—and no one has to know he added some bubbles—he slowly changed from his short. He got a good view of himself in the mirror with his shirt off. And he was disturbed by the boy that stood in front of him; he was unrecognisable. Dark splotches of dirt littered his pale complexion. He was lucky he was never blessed with the dark circles under his eyes look, but the faded brown in his iris made for it. Even Peter saw the amount his eyes have aged since he first started on the streets. He has never had a great look at himself before now because he never brought himself to care. His hair wasn't even sticking up in a mess like he had expected it too from Mr. Stark messing with them; they hung low with grease and grime. The blood and dirt cakes each strand and it made Peter want to throw up. However that was not the worst part.

What was once a small but well defined torso and chest stood what only Peter could describe as borderline skin and bones. If he squinted through his fever-induced gaze, he could see the outline of his ribs. And each bruise that painted his body should have healed hours ago; maybe even days ago.

His powers are not working.

If he is to bully himself into working for his kids, then he must oppress further by building up his strength to be able to care for the kids. Because let us forget Spider-Man whilst he cannot find his rucksack containing his crappy-made suit and not to mention the hypocrite inside him still found himself itching to provide for the kids as he gets the luxury of real food and a nice, warm bath.

Disgusted with himself, Peter looked away and stripped the rest of himself.

Once his feet came in contact with the first rush of hot water, he flinched back. His head turned to the locked door, anxiety shaking his small stature. He did it again, and this time allowed himself to sink fully into the water. He sighed quietly, blissfully closing his eyes as the warm hot water and ticklish bubbles hugged at his body. The water came up to just passed his waist and he gleefully clasped at the reality of this.

But then he couldn't help but lean his head forwards, hair flopping in his eyes. A sob threatened to clamp his throat, thinking regretfully of the kids; the kids who could be in his place right now. No. He selfishly took this opportunity when this could have been Harry from this morning. Why hadn't he argued with Doctor Banner about taking the young boy. He was an idiot; only now did he realise this to an extent as he silently cried to himself, pulling his knees to his chest and burying his head on them.

Chapter End Notes

i have to apologise for any grammatical mistakes as my writing lately has been lacking. i promise to step up my game soon!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> holy nuggets ... over 1000 kudos?? this is absolutely insane! thank you all so so much! it means so much! the facts that so many of you have enjoyed this story enough to put a little kudo on ... thank you ... much love <33

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony checked the kid that night.

Before he had sat down to eat dinner, the boy's eyes were rimmed red and a trail of light snot was formed at his nose. Tony wouldn't know what to do if the kid suddenly burst into tears, and it pulled at his heart a bit.

It was true; the kid did not deserve this type of malfunctioning treatment that was being hurled at by him, Sam and Bucky. So Tony mutely promised not only to Bruce—himself—to lay a little low. Though, he did nothing to stop the snide remarks thrown at him by the other two.

He trailed off to the living room and that left Sam and Bruce to clean up.

Steve finally showed his face upon the Earth, wrapped in a blanket and sat down by Bucky on the sofa. Subconsciously, the soldier wrapped an arm around the blonde, murmuring something to him and Steve nodded.

Tony waltzed in. An angry scowl was on his face (for act? he did not know) and faced Steve. Bucky gave him an evil look, suggesting to leave his friend alone. Tony is having none of that.

"I hope you're happy with yourself, Captain," snarked Tony.

Steve frowned, eyebrows pulled together.

"Don't give me that look, that kid you so worship is staying here—"

"Oh, give it a rest, Stark!" snapped Bruce who had also come in. He collapsed on the single sofa, sinking in and placing his hands to his head. "That kid is staying here for as long as he needs—"

"Knowing that boy, he will run away the chance he gets," said Steve seriously. He adjusted in Bucky's grip, shivering a bit.

Tony pouted mockingly ya him. "You got a man flu, Cap? What you caught off Wanda?" The blonde glared at him disapprovingly. "Trust me, I can make it worse."

"I'm sure you could, Stark, with your constant whining giving everyone a headache," said Steve smoothly.

"You're such a little shit."

"I try my best."

Tony almost growled, the agitation of the entire absurdity twisting at his insides. “I just want to ask you, Bruce, what is the goal here?”

“To get Steve’s satchel back.” Bruce said this with a bite in his voice, glaring at Steve.

The blonde is having none of it, under the weather or not. “Damn you, Banner. What have I said? It was a little thing a while ago. I just need to get a new one and—”

Bucky shook his head vigorously, making Tony clench his fingers into his palms. “No, that held your life in that from the 40’s. We’re not chucking all of that away—”

“Why not? It’s all just a bunch of shit,” spat Tony.

Bucky glowered more, now removing from Steve’s shoulder. He tried pulling Bucky back but before he could, Bucky was standing up and walking over to Tony.

“I will break your neck.” An empty threat, but Tony was sure he could do it if Steve wasn’t there.

“*Ooh*, sorry! I’m going to shit myself!”

“You better watch your mouth.”

“Oh, fuck off—”

“Tony!”

“Shut up, Bruce! I’m just saying: let’s face facts.” He turned to Steve. If he were a cartoon character, his face would be red with rage. “Your satchel is gone. You’re never getting it back. Let’s take the kid back. He doesn’t deserve the luxury we’re giving him—”

“IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT THE SATCHEL!” Bruce explodes.

He made them all startle and shut their mouths. If anyone could shut their mouths, it was the alarm of the Hulk unleashing.

Bruce blushes at his outburst, muttering something under his breath as he calmed down. Then, he looked up, a sad look in his eyes.

”It’s not just the satchel keeping him here.”

”What’s that supposed to mean?” said Tony, unable to contain his spite.

Bruce shook his head. “That’s for him to tell, not me.”

He didn’t care. That was the last he saw of everyone that night. On his way to his room, his mind worked on autopilot and he stopped outside of the door that potentially held the kid inside.

What he had done earlier was never mentioned or even looked at by Tony nor Peter. The hand and hair thing? It was something of a kind and humorous gesture. Nothing Tony Stark hasn’t done with others like Harley before.

The door creaked open, making Tony wince at the loudness of it. He peaked his head inside, uncomfortably leaning over, hand gripping on the door handle like a sloth hanging onto a branch. Through his floppy, messy bits of fringe, he squinted his eyes and found the kid. He was bunched up in a ball, on top of the covers in the clothes they had given him. He held one out of four pillows to his chest, clinging tightly with one leg thrown over it.

He found the tablets on the bed side table and Tony was relieved to find the cap had been opened, meaning Peter had taken what is required. He walked into the room, not really knowing why. He should have at least given Peter some sleep clothes, but the thought never crossed his mind.

When he got closer, he saw the kid's face was pinched up slightly, the grip on the pillow death-like and uncanny. Was he having a nightmare? Honestly, Tony couldn't find any evidence to suggest the boy was having one. Perhaps he just felt strangely ... comfortable? Tony doesn't even want to imagine the last time Peter had slept in a real bed.

His eyes drifted to the soft blanket that lied at the bottom of the bed. Another patent thought crossed his mind. It caused himself to reach over and grab said blanket, quickly draping it over the boy's small, petite body. Then, he leaned down, balancing on the tops of his feet and legs to his chest. His hand lay on the covers by the pillow, looking curiously at Peter.

"What am I going to do with you, kid?" he murmured to himself. A small, delicate sigh escaped Peter's slightly parted lips. He didn't look content, neither did he look afraid; his face was neutral and ... and so clean.

Tony shook his head, standing up again. It was decided he would need to be more patient with Peter. He hasn't done anything since the incident, and for the both of them, he hopes it never happens again.

It didn't take long for Peter to find a regular schedule with his workings in the compound. It has been a week, and the last time he stayed the night was the *first* time he stayed the night. Despite the kid living down state of New York, he still somehow manages to swing by the compound, ready for work.

Bruce has gladly opted to make the boy his lunch. Tony has to refrain himself from cringing at the way he wolfs it down. Peter only comes round whenever he wants; so far, he has showed up three times within the last week. Considering the work he is doing is a lot and rather hard, Tony is going to have to work out a way to pay the kid when it is clear he doesn't have a bank account.

As his first time on the second week at the compound, a good old Wednesday, Tony turned in his chair, stretching his legs out. Peter, new clothes provided by Bruce—and perhaps Tony as well—was hunched over the desk, a screwdriver in hand and twisting at the new A.I.

From Tony's view point, he could see the device up and crystal clean. It was small, like Tony designed them. Easy to access and easy to drop in places needed. He was impressed, to say the least.

Now light on his feet, Tony travelled over, keeping a low-profile.

His thoughts wandered elsewhere as he quietly observed the boy from behind. His hands were still a little shaky; it is possible the boy is not eating anything unless with them. Apart from the stealing of snack foods, the kid must not be getting much.

But as he watched those lithe, thieving fingers slip in and out of wires and twist and turn the screws of each corner, Tony couldn't help but see so much of himself in the kid. The determination, the stubbornness and the rejections he gave out. So many times had Tony offered some help of Peter was struggling, but he only either got a shake if the head or a timid, "No thank you, Mr. Stark."

Sometimes his God-awful stutter would be present—not that Tony thought it was bothersome—and it came out as a little squeak of, “N-no, thanks...” And his ‘s’ would trail off at the end, causing Tony to twitch a smile.

There was also no denying the kid’s ability to even work this out without any instructions. Flexible fingers and an intellectual brain seemed enough for Peter as he worked for a couple of hours, break, then work for a few more.

He also forgot, like Tony used to. Not forget any form of intelligence. Rather, the boy forgot about himself when entranced by the magic of inventions and science. Embarrassingly enough, Tony has to frequently remind the child to go to the toilet. Peter would mutter an unnecessary apology and drop everything he’s working on reluctantly and go to the bathroom. It was apart of the process of his urine infection that Tony doesn’t like taking about. But since he was literally monitoring the kid most of the days when he came over, he had no choice but to. Otherwise, he’d let Bruce do it any day.

Peter turned around after a few minutes and squeaked when seeing the looming presence of Tony Stark. The older man stepped back a bit, hands behind his back and feet crossing to the side.

Neither said anything and eventually Tony got bored of the intense staring contest and rumble of silence.

“You’re doing good, kid,” he said. A small nod of a approval came its way, and Tony found himself once again smiling.

A blush cited Peter’s cheeks and, almost—oh so close—did Tony see the hint of a grin forming on Peter’s lips. He was disappointed to see that it didn’t reach his eyes.

The sparkle of child innocence isn’t there, and may never be. But Tony doesn’t know why he cares so much if the boy smiled. It just seemed natural, because in a way, Peter is innocent. Tony may not know what it’s like to go hungry or live without a warm bed for long periods of time, but what he does know is the purity of a child. That is because he was once like Peter—much younger, but still innocent and vulnerable.

The further he comes to Peter, the more Tony wishes he understood and learned about the kid.

“Really?”

Tony gave another nod. He came over, leaning over so his shoulder was touching Peter’s. He doesn’t mind the wholesome contact, but it made Peter freeze and draw back from him.

Another reason why Tony is so curious of Peter; what made him fear adults so much? The only ones he doesn’t cower at are Bruce and Steve.

Tony went over the small device, eyebrows raised in pride at the kid’s work. All it needed now was the famous battery to boot the little gadget up and it should be up, running and working. For a while, it will sit aside because Tony has F.R.I.D.A.Y with him.

Hidden from his actions, Tony brought his hand up and placed it on Peter’s head, ruffling his hair a little hard and digging his hands a little to massage the boy’s head. He couldn’t stop the smile on his face.

“Well, Underoos, it looks like you’ve done it.” He continued to rub at the boy’s head, curls slipping and tangled between his fingers. “I’m very ... how would you say it?” He looked down, removing his hand. The boy isn't looking at him, fidgeting with his hands in his lap and shoulders

hunched. “Proud, kid. Incredibly proud of you.”

The compliments didn’t seem to be sitting well with Peter. Nevertheless, Peter nodded his thanks.

“Hey...”

When Peter still refused to look at him, Tony grabbed a stool and sat opposite him. He didn’t know what drew him to do this. But the fact the boy couldn’t even take his work into account and admire his own handy work was quite upsetting. That was a difference that they varied from one another.

Tony, he’s arrogant and a bit of a narcissist. (Reality confirms there is no ‘bit’ about it).

Pete, he’s intelligent and humble. One that does not accept the praises he earns for himself without even noticing.

Maybe it was the greed of wanting to know why the kid was actually agreeing to work. He didn’t look like one to take care of himself, no offence to him. Getting a job and earning money didn’t seem to fit the okay category with Peter. He resorted to thieving. There must be another reason; an answer Bruce refuses to give him. And if Bruce and Steve are managing to make a connection with the kid—though incredibly gradual—then he will make the possibilities happen as well.

The Stark sighed. “Listen, kid—are you listening?” He snapped his fingers in front of the boy’s face. Startling at the reality check, those brown eyes that Tony is starting to melt into looked up at him finally.

They were ... they were still void of any realisation. Why were they still like that? Tony found himself a little agitated.

“We gave you this...” began Tony, trailing off a little. He was gaining his own frustration. This kid gave him oppressing emotions between guilt, sadness, pride and vexation. “We gave you here to work so you can make some sort of a living, and you can’t even take the praises I’m giving you.”

Peter nodded slowly, implying to Tony that he understood the words he spoke sharply.

“Just tell me, kiddo, what is it that you want?”

The mention of that had Peter’s head snapping up in an instant. “W-what?”

Tony rolled his childishly. “Kid, I know you sneak food from us. I would suggest you stop, because it’s not as if you have a family to feed, do you?”

Ouch.

Even Tony wanted to smack himself for saying that. He had no right to say that.

However, Peter remained emotionless and stared right through Tony.

“Hey, kid?” he tried a little desperately. There was a short pause before he hesitantly reaches out and held at Peter’s arm go grab his attention.

Peter acknowledged this at least. He shook his head a well as shaking Tony’s hand off. “I sh-should get home.”

Peter started to climb from the chair and for some—*stupid*—reason, Tony jumped up and exclaimed, “Hey, do you like Star Wars?”

Wait to go, *old man* ... Tony can just about hear Rhodey's disappointed voice now.

Tony has watched all of the Star War's with Rhodey, Happy, Pepper and made sure to get the super soldiers of their team to watch them. He wouldn't say he's a big fan, but he definitely enjoys the movies. If he's correct and the kid is a lot like him, then—

"Star Wars?"

Was it possible for this boy's voice to get any annoyingly higher? Because if so, Tony wants to here that hope and excitement a lot more often.

Tony chuckled. "Yeah, kid, Star Wars. Ever watched them?"

It was obvious he had watched them by the way his brown eyes actually lit up for life for a split second of mentioning it

"They're-they're my f-ff-favourite..." Peter trailed off. He still had that ghastly gaze of remorse in his eyes, an empty full from his past lies and deception.

"Favourite movies?" Tony had his hands in front of him, clasping then together in a tight grip. He had the hint of a grin edged on his face, his eyes soft and eyebrows relaxed above his stress. The kid's soft is rubbing off on him. A little bit of his mother shone through him at his most vulnerable, but there was no reason for Tony to feel any form of impuissant at this moment. It was the kid's own effect. And he almost detested it. "I've got them all."

A little hesitation split his smile and the boy was back to his usual straight-lipped face.

Without his normal thinking of space awareness, Tony held out his hand and tucked his fingers into the soft fabric of Peter's shirt. He ignored the wince and pulled gently. "I'll show you, Underoos. It is about time you had a little break. One or two little movies couldn't possibly break your cycle of thought."

The persuasion wasn't enough of a tug to let Peter up. Tony wasn't about to get frustrated again, so he let the kid go. He still smiled, his eyes a little down cast. He was just going by what Bruce said to make the kid as comfortable as possible. And he would never admit to anyone, but the boy is growing on him. How long did it take for him to finally start talking to the boy like this? A good week. What would it be like next week, or the week after that?

Already, Tony was seeking into the future, and he saw every possible timeline to have at least one picture of Peter in it.

The kid is smart; he needed someone as intelligent as the boy to work at a place like the compound. Or maybe be as Tony's little apprentice.

Tony faked yawn and stretched frantically. Perhaps the playful way is the only way.

"Well, I hate to hit and run, kid, but I got a date with Star Wars." Tony made his exit towards the door, leaving a slightly baffled Peter. He still sat on the stool, fingers bunched up into his palm. The Stark looked back, smiling smugly. "If you need me, I'll be in the cine-area."

"Y-you have a cine-area?"

Tony was out the door before Peter could even squeak that out. He had a smug smirk on his face, just waiting for the kid to follow him. It was his initial plan to make Peter follow in his light footsteps padding across the floor.

He didn't care for the silence behind him. He could almost feel Peter's desperation to watch a little movie—to take a break, something he at the least deserved.

The incident revolving around Steve's things has by no means escaped anyone's minds.

Steve has approached him at a gentle cost, and Tony assumes he was asking. Peter was only nodding along, not really looking Steve in the eyes. The blonde had his patience, unlike Tony. He gave Peter kind smiles and light praises. In fact, the kid even lets Steve—and Bruce—pat his shoulder or rub at his back as a well done.

Tony didn't want to really talk to Peter about it yet. The kid wouldn't even let him at least put an encouraging hand on his shoulder without sinking into himself like a frightened animal. Was he really that intimidating? He would have thought someone as big as Steve was. But perhaps the kid knew the difference between short and angry and tall and teddy bear.

The man shook his head, and walking towards one of the many seats in the cine-room and instantly set up his movie station. He decided the first movie would be the most appropriate. If the kid was such a nerd, he needed everything.

And his predictions were correct.

He needn't the movie loud as only the beginning is showing on screen when he saw out of the corner of his eyes the door to the room opening timidly. A small boy popped out, curls falling over his eyes and steps quiet.

It was like he was trying to do it as silently as possible so Tony wouldn't notice him. But like Peter, Tony Stark is a very observant man.

"C'mere, kid. I don't bite." Tony cast his eyes towards Peter and the boy froze. He gestured with his hand and patted the space on the sofa next to him. There was the right amount of space between them to sit together and not feel awkward.

Reluctantly, Peter crawled on the heels of his feet and sat down. Tony smiles, patting his shoulder. Even that made him tense. He subconsciously pulled a cushion to his chest, squeezing, and keeping his for eyes trained on the screen.

It was in Tony's mind to at least say something else. But maybe this is meant to go slowly. After all, wasn't he the one who outright accused him of prostituting girls and discouraged Peter being here in the first place? The kid was bound to be wary of him. And Tony honestly has no trouble trying to make amends to that.

Chapter End Notes

> again, thank you so much for the 1000 kudos and nearly 300 comments!! something i never thought i would achieve! and to the ones on my last chapter for keeping me motivated! so please do leave comments if you must!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Peter walked along the woods of the tunnel's, he was muttering under his breath the amount of money he has managed to save up in the last couple of weeks.

Doctor Banner insisted on paying him weekly, a good $5.40 an hour. He had only shown up three times a week so far, and he intends to keep it that way. Only once has he actually slept there, and that was the first night. He felt as if he didn't deserve to. He also made sure to stay for a certain amount of hours so his pay wouldn't be all over the place.

So far, he has managed to save up a good $90 this week. From three weeks of saving up, he has got over $200. And, wow, it is so so much. He's been buying so much stuff for the kid's.

"Whoa! you got more fanta?"

"Is that coke?!"

"Holy damn, Petey! He got us marshmallows!"

He knew it was bad to keep spending this money on junk foods. It was like Christmas for the kids.

Now that he has a day off from not only the kids, but his work at the Compound, he found this opportunity to find the satchel.

From weeks of rain, it must of been ruined by now. And as Peter put that money away in his spare rucksack, he continued his search for the satchel.

If he remembers correctly, it was near the abandoned tunnel; where he managed to crawl away from the Avengers from being found out again.

Slowly, his feet descended across the overgrow, wet grass. Each end tickled and dampened his trousers. It did no such thing as to make him grimace as he was used to this. The only thing he needed to focus on was the remembrance of where his trip led him on that chase. Where he has managed to drop it just so the Avengers couldn't find it. Wherever it may be, it would be damp and spoiled by now. No doubt each and every beautiful drawing Mr. Rogers has ever drawn dusted from the waterfalls.

Peter sighed, rubbing at his eyes in frustration. He's been here for a good couple of hours. One strand on the grass meant nit-picking the grounds apart.

Then the sudden fear swept over his body. What if someone had found the satchel and stolen it? He wouldn't know what to do ... he wouldn't know what to tell Mr. Rogers...

The man is a huge teddy bear. Only his size intimidated Peter at first. But he was soft and kind and understanding at the most. Apart from Bruce, Peter placed a little trust in Mr. Rogers. There is no saying what he thinks of Mr. Stark just yet.

He shook his head, pushing aside a huge patch of tangled grass. From the food and drinks he has been receiving, his body hasn't got that deadly skeletal look anymore. Finally, a little more chub is coming back along with his natural defined muscles he gained when playing Spider-Man.

Something he no longer has the energy to do. In fact, he's sure of himself to throw the musky clothing away once he finds his rucksack, with it inside including the satchel.

As well as gaining his weight again gradually—though, it is still not enough for a boy, especially one with an enhanced metabolism—his eyesight has resumed to its normal stance. Nothing no longer remains double-sighted or fuzzy. Even his hearing was loud and clear, allowing him to willow the wisps of the wind and sounds of nature.

Just as he was about to give up just the slightest hope, an eye-opener or the unusual vintage brown caught his eye. He head whipped around and landed on the bag on the ground.

He slouched down and let his knees fall onto the grass. He grabbed it and found it was his backpack and peaking from it was the satchel. With a deep breath of relief, he pulled the straps up and let the backpack fall onto his lap. It was soaked through, which made Peter cringe and bow his head in disappointment. But the good part was that he has finally found it. All he needed to do was somehow find someplace it would be able to dry.

At the moment, the late mornings suns rays told him it was going to be a fairly decent day. Perhaps there would be no such rain today? He needed to risk it. Besides, how much worse could this thing get?

Inside, he found his web-shooters. He placed them around his wrist and risked the temptation of trying it. Luckily, they were in full function. He was happy enough that he had made them somewhat waterproof before he stopped his journey home. He even had enough energy to promptly swing himself up on a tree. Feeling the delighted feel of lifting his feet from the ground again, he allowed a little time to swing from tree-to-tree, getting to grips with his peculiar skills as a web-slinger again.

By the time he reached the end of the forest and into the main, suburban town area, he climbed on top of the familiar roof-tops, palms of hands stickier than they have been before from lack of use. Surprisingly, it didn't take as much effort as he expected. Maybe it was from the rush of adrenaline. And whatever it was, it made him smile smugly at his upcoming abilities.

He made it to the top without a minute to spare and fished the satchel from his rucksack as well as his Spider-Man suit. All fabrics were soaked through and dropped pathetically onto the stones rooftop. Peter opened up the satchel before tending to anything else. He winced at the ruined sketch pad and picture of that beautiful lady in the old watch. None of it was smudged, but Peter had to use his nimble fingers as to not rip the ancient picture.

Next was the sketch book.

He dared take a glance inside and found that God was on his side. None pictures were spreading their pencil products. Only the ink was spreading a little, which was expected. He didn't like the way his heart thumped thoroughly at the sight of it. His best option was to leave it in the sun.

Once he fitted all of Mr. Rogers things, he focused on his Spider-Man suit. Well, the red, sleeveless hoodie with a spider printed on it—one Uncle Ben got him because of his fascination with arachnids (that is, behind glass). Mainly, his uncle had got it for him as a joke on his birthday. But Peter saw that as a perfect opportunity to use once that blasted spider had bit him.

The next was his plain, baggy blue, long sleeved t-shirt he put on underneath the hoodie. Then his blue jogging bottoms, long red socks and red nike shoes. It was the best he could do. He actually got his mask by the red fabrics in textiles at school, cutting the eye-holes into them to put his old swimming goggles in them.

(Perhaps somebody like Flash should have been Spider-Man. He had the money at least to create an amazing suit).

All of it was ruined. Now he could get a good look at the suit without having to rush to put it on.

The suit in general is terrible, but Peter never had and never will have the money to an amazing example of a suit like Tony Stark. But there were holes, rips and burned parts that he's never even noticed before; in places where he wished they weren't. But he has said to himself that he won't be doing this for a while. Perhaps maybe forever.

Powers. Wasted. He knows that. But what good would come out of him rescuing people? Nothing.

With a sigh, he left everything like that. Hopefully, at least the satchel and Mr. Rogers possessions will be dried by this afternoon. It was warm enough today, so he didn't see as to why not.

He climbed back down and trekked back into the woods towards his final location for the day. The tunnel's.

He made his way inside towards the unseen barbaric's. He was shocked to see it was buzzing with people. Everyone except the kids. He cursed himself silently. Ever since the money he has been getting, he's been trying to encourage them to stop with the thieving. Or at least keep it on the low.

"Hey, boy! Got anythin' for us, then?"

Peter ignored the yells as he sent himself towards his friends. That didn't last long when someone pulled on his rucksack and turned him to face that someone.

It was a man, no surprise. He never did get many woman to pick on him.

"I was talkin' to you. I ain't got time for playin' games."

Another bonus about Peter getting his strength back—he also got his bite back.

"Y'know, *mate*, neither do I. That's *why* I ain't got any," he mocked. This earned him a hard look and since the man was bigger than him—not taller, but just bigger in size—he managed to back him up against the wall. Peter didn't feel the least bit intimidated. He had no need to. Only because out of the corner of his eye he found none other than Jordan coming to his rescue ... again.

"C'mon, man, leave." His drooled British accent sent shivers down Peter's spine. He did not sound happy in the slightest.

"This kid has money."

"Sure he does, mate," said Jordan, gently prying the man away. He then leaned in to the man, whispering in his ear, "*Why'd ya' think I wanna deal wiv 'im*?"

The man shoved off and Peter stared at Jordan, ready for him to start shouting at him.

What was met was a sincere smile ... just about. Peter could see the doll behind those cold eyes.

"C'mere, Petey." Peter startled when the older boy wrapped him in a huge, bear hug. He squeezed at his shoulders and cracking at his bones. In mind sight, he couldn't really breath, the familiar feeling of his chest and throat tightening from before the spider bite. Finally, Jordan let go, patting his cheeks a bit too harshly. "Haven't seen ya' in a long time, mate! Where've ya' been?" He put his arm around Peter's shoulders, dragging him towards the others. Peter got a weird sense of deja

vu from this, but this time, he doesn't think he will like the picture of this very much.

"Hey, Petey Pie's back!" Dorian shouted drowsily. He had a can of coke gripped tightly in his fist, spilling the fizzy substances everywhere.

They all faked a cheer. Jordan let go and suddenly, his rucksack was being ripped from his back, shoulder sockets grinding brashly against his bones. He squeaked out a little whimper and then gained his sense, realising what was going on.

With a strangled cry, he dove for his rucksack as the others started pulling out the mounts of over $200 he had earned over the past couple of weeks.

"No, *stop*!" he shouted desperately in attempt, maybe hope, that they may give him some sympathy. But there was not such thing as that in this group.

"Holy shit, Pete!" Carter geld up a $50 dollar not. He placed it just under his nose and sniffed, moaning in a way that was not necessary. "You must have been good to get this tip!"

"Met a sugar daddy, have you?" Aaliyah dove into his bag and pulled out a couple of 20's. "I always knew you were a little whore. Such a hypocrite."

Before Peter could even protest against these statement, something witty at least, "I get paid for sleeping in Tony Stark's compound," but then realised revealing he's with the Avengers would either expose him too much or they just wouldn't believe him. He just stood there, motionless, waiting for them to take more of his stuff.

They didn't, surprisingly. They took the rest of his money and Jordan and Carter dragged him aside. Jordan's arm was around his shoulders, his nose seeping into his neck uncomfortably. His hand travelled up and ruffled at his curls. Carter patted him on the back and before they could do anything else remotely questioning, the backed him up against a wall. Carter pinned him there for good measure and it took all of Peter's will not not lash out angrily at them.

"What is it th-that you want?" he sneered. He was almost at breaking point with all of them. After two, horrendous, long years, he's finally at tipping point.

"The money you earn, where is it from?"

Peter stiffened in Carter's hold, trying to pry his small hands away. It didn't work; of course it wasn't going to work.

"C'mon, Petey," cooed Carter. "Unless you really are working as a sugar baby. It would suit you."

Jordan smirked.

Peter was wondering what the looks were for when all of a sudden he was kicked and pinned down onto the hard, dirty floor. He couldn't register in his mind what was really happening until he felt the belt of his trousers starting to become undone.

No, that isn't happening. He has no choice but to fight back.

He struggled helplessly. It wasn't just Carter and Jordan. Other hands—grimy, huge and tough hands were gripping at his hips and he cried out, kicking helplessly. He still had his web-shooters around his wrists, but he couldn't risk it. Another hand—Jordan's—placed his head down, skin digging into unwanted stones and gravel to mark his face. If Peter were himself without his freaky metabolism, he would have no chance. But now, he has no choice but to choose life instead of

death.

With one, final push, he lifted himself up, gripping so hard at Jordan's quivering hand that he is sure he heard a few bones break. The unknown man jumped back in surprise and Carter was knocked to the ground. Peter didn't leave time to look at any of them, feeling bile rise in his throat as he pulled his trousers back up again.

Most of the tunnel was silent, people looking over, none bothering to help. Something like this happened monthly, and only Peter was sane enough to at least help. But never had it ever been aimed at him.

He started to run, almost tripping over his own, clumsy feet.

"YOU'RE GIVING US THAT FUCKING MONEY, PETER! *YOU HEAR ME*? OR DON'T FUCKING BOTHER HELPING YOUR KIDS OUT!"

"OH, C'MON, PETEY, IT WAS A JOKE!"

Peter honestly had no doubt it was a joke to scare him; that doesn't make it alright though.

He continued to run, the lump in his throat over bearing and the tears threatening to spill over the edge of his eyes. He couldn't cry; someone as sadistic as Jordan didn't deserve his tears.

He slowed to a near stop and found he was standing in the small part of town. He promised the kids food. He promised them nice foods and fizzy drinks. He has no other option but to lay out his plan.

For a while, his feet walked slowly around town. Not many people were out at the moment. Some at school, some in work. It was the urban neighbourhood most knew to steer clear of. So many times had Peter stolen crappy goods from here; he has no trouble in taking some muffins, apples, other delicious tastes for one's tongue.

There was a stand in front of him. No one stood by it. Maybe fate decided to be kind to him today. Each ray of sun blessed and kissed his dirty skin. And when he reached forwards, eyes darting back and forth between the musky, unkempt windows, he snatched at a baked good. A few cupcakes into his empty, now filling, rucksack. Light feet gave him the chance to skip from stool to stool. A man was watching him suspiciously from the sides and went back inside after a shake of his head. Peter took this opportunity to grab at some of the cold drinks on the stand. Until the man came back out again.

"*Oi*!"

Peter nearly fell over by trying the scuffle away. His shoes a scraped painfully against the sandy pavement, making him lose his footing a little. The drinks he had clutched in his hold were icy and fizzy, bubbling with the excitement of his run. It didn't sound like he was being followed. He slowed, his feet finally touching the damp dew of the grass. He used this time to place the drinks in the back of his bag until he could no longer stand no more; someone had smashed him in the back. He crashed to the ground, dropping the few drinks he had in his hold. Then, a weird sensation was being pinned at his hands in front of him. Irritably, he looked up to see his hands were just finishing off their final touches; web-fluids were pining him down.

What—?

"C'mon, hurry up," a voice said amusingly. "I suppose you found those drinks by yourself. Cold drinks don't last for hours, boy, you should know that."

Peter had a hard time twisting around just to see who it was. Whoever it is, he didn't sound old; he sounded younger than Peter. His foot was still pressing unnecessarily hard into the middle of his back.

A whimper left his lips when he felt the pulling of his shoulder socket as the guy tore the rucksack from his back. He heard the familiar rummaging and then, the pressure on his back was gone. For a moment, Peter contemplated whether or not to break free. Unless these spider-webs were a completely different design, he could easily use his own skills as Spider-Man to break free. However, he couldn't think of that as of now, because the person was in front of him.

Black—it travelled up his well-defined legs and to the cool, web designs among his chest. A much better suit than Peter could ever imagine creating. The man at hand had a mask, still black and red, his eyes white and narrow. If he wasn't wearing the mask, Peter can imagine the man smirking mischievously at his capture and prey.

"What's your name, kid?"

Peter scold, shaking his head. "I need those."

The man nodded. "Sure you do—"

Peter couldn't contain himself, a low frown on his face. "Who are you? What is it you do?"

"I'm Spider-Man, of course!"

"No, *you're* not," said Peter. He shook his head again, pushing himself up on his knees. All that was left now was his bound hands. But he still couldn't let this man know of his own straights. "There is a Spider-Man—"

"Who has been doing a lousy job of the past month or so." The man stood up, staring down at the helpless boy. Mockingly, he held up his rucksack, shaking his head. "Look, dude, I hate to stop you like this, but there is other options rather than stealing."

Peter huffed out a frustrated sigh, still trying to pull on the webs. He looked up, admitting defeat in a tired voice, "Can you let me go?"

The guy let out his very own sigh. "Look, in my morality, I would like to let you go. After all, what? you're like, 14? 15?"

Unbelievably, the dude was still busy ridiculing him. In a way, it was a little humiliating and Peter found himself starting to dislike this new 'Spider-Man'. It may seem he's a little jealous, and maybe he is. He wishes he were as cocky and meaningful as this one.

Peter didn't bother answering his question and pulled again. Tears—embarrassingly enough—stung at the edge of his eyes, threatening to break the dam. He felt so helpless and envious of the man that stood in front of him. A better example of himself. The nicer, more rational version. It should have been this guy all along. Not Peter. Maybe then Uncle Ben would be okay. And most likely, so would Aunt May.

"You know, I don't appreciate you going out late at night—ah! don't give me that look, young man. I know you sneak out."

Peter smiled bitterly at the memory. Neither Aunt May not Uncle Ben ever knew about him being Spider-Man. How he stopped petty crimes that he now commits to himself. God, if heaven is real, Peter wouldn't be surprised if his Aunt and Uncle—parents too—were looking down at him with

distasteful expression and judgement of their disappointment.

“Hey, I’m sorry...”

The pressure on his shaking hands were realised and he drew in a deep breath, sobs begging to be key free. His breathing was hitched and his surroundings were blurry. He just about registered his rucksack full of goods being dropped and then there was an arm around his shoulder, squeezing lightly.

“It’s okay...”

“I need th-them...” Peter chocked on a wet cough, bringing the heels of his palms to press down onto his burning eyes.

“Well, I can’t really help you in that department—”

“*I know, but you don’t understand!*” he snapped, holding in more trapped sobs. He forced a teary-eyed look at the masked man, whole-heartedly glaring at him. “I used to be like you, you know.”

The guy shook his head. “I’m sorry—I don’t understand what you mean—”

“*That’s my point!*” Peter shuffled away from him, the dizziness not letting him settle the beating of his heart. “You w-with the webs and-and stopping crimes—looking out f-ff-for the little-little guy, right?” The guy couldn’t fit anything else in until Peter was rambling again, looking anywhere but the hero. “Well, guess what? Life isn’t always about pissing rainbows and shitting gold, okay? It *sucks*! It really...” He let himself take a deep breath, voice barley coming out in a whisper. “It really does suck...” Peter didn’t comprehend the silence that took place between them. He could guess it stunned or tensed. Maybe even both. But when he looked up and found the man taking off the mask, he couldn’t help the confused, tiny gasp that passed his cracked lips.

The man ... was he really man? Barley, as he looked about Peter’s age. Possibly even younger. A teenager, just like Peter. He had dark skin, black hair and full lips with soft, brown eyes. He looked sad, and Peter shamed himself for upsetting him.

“You’re the Spider-Man, aren’t you?” the teen mumbled quietly. “The one from YouTube? The one who I accused to be slacking off for a couple of months?”

Swallowing pitifully, Peter nodded, wiping the last evidence of any tears. His mind was finally starting to clear up and his mind was a buzzing static anymore.

To his amazement, the teenager gave his rucksack back, along with pushing the drinks towards him. At his confused look, the hero said, “I may not know how you ended up like this, nor do want to know of the difficulties you must have faced. But, I’ll let this one go. Only because I know if you have the courage to go against your own laws, you have the courage to become the Spider-Man everyone misses again."

Peter couldn’t help but admire him. A small, tainted smile edging his lips. “Thank you...” he said quietly. “What’s your name?”

“Miles,” the boy said with a nod, standing up again. “My name is Miles.”

“Do you live in Queens?” asked Peter curiously.

The teen, Miles, shook his head with a small smile. “Brooklyn. I manage there. I was just wondering where the Spider-Man of Queens had gone.”

Peter stared wide-eyes like a puppy. He couldn't help the next question. "Will I see you around?"

Miles slipped his mask back on, pulling out a webbed-rope from his suit by his wrist, preparing to launch himself into the trees. "Of course you will." He paused for a second. "How about you? What's your name?"

"Peter..."

"Well, Peter, it was nice to meet you." And he was off, swinging away from Peter so fast he could hardly keep his eyes from him.

Who knew a boy, possibly younger than Peter, had more potential than him?

Chapter End Notes

thank you all for the last chapter! comments keep me incredibly motivated, so do leave one! and perhaps a kudo? :) you're all so lovely!

and, ta-dah! miles is a little character playing along in this story. his being here is quite important! one of you actually gave me the suggestion to place him in here! now, i haven't actually read the comics of him or seen the tv show of him, so i'm not sure what his characters like. i just explored with my own ideas x3

anyways, yah! it's getting interesting now after this chapter, i promise!! can't wait for the tony and peter bonding <33

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> freaking, had to edit the whole thing twice because archive couldn't save my work when i was about to publish uhhh, i think it's just time for some sleep (lol, what is sleep?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peter came in the early afternoon while Tony was relaxing by the T.V. The kid had rung the normal desk buzzer, anxiously fiddling with the sleeves of his ruined jumper. Every time he came here, Tony and Bruce insisted the boy let them take his clothes and wash them. He sometimes refused. Other times he hesitantly agreed, allowing himself a little bit of dignity instead of pride.

Tony stretched on the sofa, turning the T.V. off. He had taken a break as it was from his work. Now that Peter is here, Pepper has been on his ass lately about slacking, so he encourages himself to do more. But he's getting old, okay? He's allowed a little rest once in a while.

"Tony, your rent boy's here!"

"Shut the *fuck* up, Sam!"

Tony marches past the man, sending him a wicked glare and kicking him in the shin before walking towards the lift. It was lazy of him, but who's got time for stairs?

When it binged, he travelled into the lobby area.

He found the kid in a chair, hugging his rucksack to his chest and chin lying on top of it. Tony guessed he had a bunch of papers in there from last week. Some health and safety applications and other various junk paper work Bruce had (forced) told him to sign. A little concern always wavered when it came to Bruce. Tony didn't really understand the concern—the kid was fine. He lives on the streets. Tony is sure the boy can handle a little rough-housing. But, of course, Bruce insisted. (As well as Steve).

"You alright, squirt?" said Tony as he came forward. Peter startled and stood up abruptly, his face pale and cheeks flushed from the biting winds outside. "Hey." He patted the boy's shoulder which encouraged him forwards. "We got the rest of that A.I. to fix today. You up for it?"

Peter nodded, begrudgingly eyeing Tony's whereabouts and attire. It wasn't as if the older man didn't take any notice of the out-of-the-blue envy, but didn't say anything. Peter is never normally as fidgety and quiet as this. In fact, over the past couple weeks, it takes a lot to get the kid shut-up his mumbling. He's constantly talking to himself, stuttering words and phrases under his breath as he works. The boy's mind works on autopilot. He zones out. He forgets where he is. Tony will take a peak and find he's hunched over, A.I. blocked form view whilst rapidly mumbling words in a riddle. Tony doesn't think Peter realises he does it. The words, Tony can never make out. But it's obvious to the Stark that Peter was once a huge talker. A series of events tumbling passed his excited, wide-open mouth in a radiant smile.

Almost ... almost could Tony see behind the phantoms of Peter's eyes. And he doesn't think he's

getting very close to allowing the kid to open up. If the kids going to be as anxious as he is now all day, Tony will have no choice but to manipulate it out of him.

They pass the kitchen where Natasha and Clint sit on the counter top. Tony stops, causing Peter to walk into his back.

“Whoa, there, kid.” Tony steadied him on the shoulder, missing the blush of embarrassment when turning back to the two ex-assassins on the table. “Get your asses back to work!”

Clint looked up and his eyes wandered to Peter. The kid shrunk back a bit, as if trying to use Tony as a shield.

“I’m flattered that you think I’m a good enough human-shield for you, pipsqueak, but even I’ll admit to not being able to outrun Hawkeye.” Tony explained this in a light, friendly tone and Clint smirked, wiggling his eyebrows. His mouth was full of donuts, spraying them everywhere to Tony’s dismay.

“*Th-that’s Hawkeye*?” squeaked Peter.

To prove his point, Clint jumped down from the counter (or rather, was pushed by Natasha) and lazily stumbled over to them. Peter backed up more.

“Who’s the pipsqueak, Tony? He’s a little young to be on the team, right?”

“Nah,” said Natasha, still sitting on the counter. “You see, years ago, Tony hooked up with a normal one-night stand, but the condom broke.”

“It would have been better for her to swallow, aye?” Clint patted Tony sympathetically.

Tony glowered at him. Then at Natasha. He could see Peter’s face at the moment, but if the kids' living on the streets, it is most likely him and the mother aren’t the closest. For once, he’s not finding these kind of jokes funny. They are just starting to develop into plain, mean remarks.

“He’s my intern,” growled Tony.

“You sure?” said Clint. “Either that, your failed abortion or a thief.”

Tony instinctively looked behind him and his heart nearly broke. Never had he seen tears actually glisten in Peter’s innocent eyes right at him. His eyes told Tony to beg them to stop. He has seen Peter cry. The kid thinks he’s being discrete, but Tony can see from where he works. The kid will be pulling things out and then putting them back in. His hands would shake and all of a sudden, tears will leak from his eyes. Quickly, he would wipe them away. Tony wouldn’t admit to observing the kid closely in concern. He’s so sad but at the same time, he just doesn’t care. No life resides in his eyes anymore, and for a kid of only 15 to 18, that is unbelievably scary.

“That’s *enough*, Clint.”

Tony turned back around to see Natasha pulling in his shoulder. Clint has kids himself, so, if anything, Tony would have thought he would sympathise with Peter at least a little bit. Then again, Clint has always been quite cold and blunt. He didn’t think the archer would be towards a kid though; a kid who has just turned his head to not allow Clint to find the cracked forms in his eyes.

Clint was glaring solidly at Tony. “Hiring him. Really?” He scoffed, pushing Natasha’s hand off of his shoulder. “I would have thought friends cane first, Stark. Not homeless throw-aways.”

“Clint—“

“*No*! Natasha, don’t you see?” he burst out.

“Clint, you don’t understand—”

“What has Sam and Bucky told Clint, Romanoff?” demanded Tony.

“I don’t know, Tony!”

“That little *shit* is taking our things and you’re letting him into the compound?!”

“Clint, for fucks sake—”

“Whoa! Language, Stark! The brat might pick up on that too—”

“You don’t even fucking live here, Barton!”

”Does it look like I give two shits? I bet your ass he’s got something smuggled in his—”

“*STOP IT*!”

All three adults were shocked into silence. They turned, looking at a distraught and shaking Peter.

His fingers were bunched up to his chest, pale and dirty. Tony saw more closely at his frosted-bitten lips, scabs lining the bottom and brown, crumbles of blood scattering his chin. His hair matted. Clothes damp. What the hell happened to the kid whilst he hasn’t visited in only four days?

“Please stop...” Peter sniffed, stubbornly wiping at his sore eyes. Tony stood rigid, wanting to reach out and being the boy’s head to his chest. “I-I’m sorry, I’m sorry this happened. But ... you have to stop. Please—”

“You think you deserve any empathy, kid?” snarked Clint.

Peter shook his head in defeat. Before he could say anything else, Tony steps closer. With a surge of forth-coming confidence, he swiftly lands his left arm over the kid’s small shoulders, pulling him protectively close to his side. It shocks him, to say the least. Tony didn’t think he would actually act upon giving into the kid’s silent cries. Without another word, Tony whisked them away, leaving behind a muted Clint and a stunned Natasha.

Their footsteps echoed down the hall. No matter what, Tony needed that A.I fixed as soon as possible. As much as he wanted to watch another movie with the kid—which unnerved him for being too soft—he steered them towards the lift. Tony shamefully removed his arm, not liking the soft, sad sigh that came from the kid.

They stayed in silence on the way down. Tony watched Peter. His appearance in general sucked, to say the least. Something bad must have happened to him.

“Sir, Ms. Potts would like to speak to you,” spoke Friday from within the lift. Peter visibly jumped, his shaking a mass blur in Tony’s eyes as he automatically lifted his head to the Irish accent.

The lift doors opened before Tony could get anything out. He saw Pepper waiting there with a couple of folders at hand, smiling at him.

“Ah, Tony!” she exclaimed. Too out of character for her. Tony grimaced, wondering what the

blonde-haired woman wanted to eat on to him about this time.

Peter still remained behind Tony, and the Stark swore he felt the ghost of those nimble fingers brush against the bottom of his sweater for support. Something in the back of his mind wanted Peter to hold on; he wanted the kid to know that he could trust Tony. All of this softness was rubbing off on the older man, so the kid might want to take advantage of it.

“Please may you explain to me the meaning of this?”

Tony groaned inwardly. He knows what she’s about to press on him. Tail between his lips, Tony followed the blonde who spread the folders out before him on a table. She took a glance at Peter and Tony was relaxed to see the gentle smile she aimed towards the teenager. It made Peter loosen the grip he had on his own hands and return the smile.

“Kid, why don’t you get started on the A.I.?” said Tony. Peter nodded, slipping away from the both of them. The man turned back to Pepper, who was still smiling, but her eyes showed the doubts in Tony’s heart. The look of being unimpressed with his judgement.

“How reckless must you be?” she said calmly.

Tony preferred when she demanded these answers from him. He loved Pepper with all his heart, but she was scary. However, he knew she was only trying to look out for him. Because in front of them, Pepper showed the articles on The Iron Man having a midnight flight ... only to nearly cause a load of planes to crash to the ground.

Tony’s lips twitched, tempting to not smile. “I’m not ... a sociopath...” he started slowly.

“I know that,” scoffed Pepper. “How many times have I had to wipe your tears for you? Remember that time Steve said he was taken?”

“I was drunk,” Tony said defensively.

“And you’re also not attracted to men,” Pepper stated blindly. Then she smirked at him. “Or are you?”

“I beg to differ.” There was a short pause. “Men are attractive, yes; ten out ten would, but at the same time, nah.”

Pepper let out a genuine laugh and it was music to Tony’s ears. Neither have had the opportunity to properly spend time to with one another. Pepper has been incredibly busy with the company and Tony has been secretly observing and caring for a kid with Steve and Bruce’s help. Pepper doesn’t actually know much of Peter, other than he was a kid who had sent in his C.V. and just happened to get lucky with Tony and Bruce. The state of him has obviously made her raise a few eyebrows in the making, but she leaves herself quiet whilst the boy in in the room. Tony knows he’s going to have a little talk later with her about Peter.

“We’re getting off topic.” Pepper became serious as she sat down comfortably on a stall.

Tony always wondered how she managed to sit and stand even with high-held and a tight, fitting dress with a pencil skirt. Tony will never understand why women have to wear such things to work in certain places. In his defence, when he was the boss of Stark Industries, he would have allowed Pepper to at least where comfortable fitting work trousers, but society still sucks. Maybe not as bad in developed countries like America, but definitely in the poorer, emerging countries.

“What was that all about?”

She pointed the small of her index finger to the paper. There were no clear shots of what exactly Tony was up to, but it showed the lights and smoke from the Iron Man suit heading dizzily towards a couple of airborne planes. Tony rubbed at his forehead. Now that he is seeing the pictures, he didn't find it as exciting as before. He got drunk that night and things were not adding up.

His mind ... he looked towards Peter, the lump in his throat disallowing oxygen from making its way from his barley patted lips. The boy looked like matted as a wet puppy, drowning in its own hair and eyes sad and wider with purity. That's right, the boys virginal, despite how much he's probably seen. Heck, Tony is forty-eight-years-old and he's experienced so much ... so so much. But, is it possible Peter's voyage destroyed from childhood has stuck and will forever be? Has he seen so much that it mounts to Tony's own level of PTSD? If so, Tony feels the horrid pulling feeling more and more to help this kid.

That night—a few nights back—just as Peter made his way from the compound, Tony was alone, bar from Steve sleeping uncomfortably on the sofa. He and Sam have managed to catch Wanda's fever. (And hey, a super-soldier can get run-down once in a while). He sat in the kitchen, staring blindly at the wine glass full to the brim with vodka and whiskey, contemplating whether or not to kick the boy off the course.

This was mainly because he couldn't stand the guilt he was feeling. He continuously thought this through, over and over again. If he no longer had to see the kid anymore, then all would be okay. He wouldn't have to worry about him anymore. But then, not only would Steve disapprove, Bruce may throw him out of the compounds windows from the highest point. Those two were strangely sympathetic with the kid, and he had no clue as to why. Tony could only help the kid the best way he could, because he only had knowledge of the fact the boy lived on the streets ... and for a while too.

So, he drank and drank until he could see no more. He must have gone out on a late nights ride.

Pepper seems to be able to read him from the inside out. She sighed, putting the papers away. Her eyes gazed passed Tony and he automatically looked back. A sense of pride swelled wide in his chest when he found the kid already getting to work. Only a few tools happened to be placed in front of him, the project almost done and dusted.

"Is he okay?" mumbled Pepper.

Tony had to double-take. Pepper never mumbled. And when he turned again, he found a crease in Pepper's brow.

"He's *filthy*, Tony; as if he's just come off of a street-fight."

She must caught the wince that extracted from Tony. She didn't push it. Unfortunately, Pepper is one of the only people who could read into Tony's eyes. And though she can come across as rather uptight and perhaps a bit forthcoming in others eyes, she so gentle and patient with Tony at the best of times. Only now is she starting to understand him, and slowly, he is opening up to her more and more. Even after all these years.

Now his mission is to break the kid.

"Shall we do something?" Pepper carefully tucked the folder under her arm, casting a worried glance back at Peter.

Tony shook his head. "He's not one to open up." He ran his hand across the table, a distracted

frown set upon his face. “He’s ... *he’s a ghost*, Pepper.”

Pepper hummed, expectedly. “Have you been kind to him?”

Guiltily, Tony shook his head.

Pepper only lend him a gentle smile in return. “You’re not Howard, Tony.”

“I’m not saying anything about having kids, Pep,” said Tony.

Pepper sighed, as if she knew what Tony had meant. “I’m not saying that you will. I’m saying that this boy can be your young league. Tell him about yourself. Become that protector.”

“I can’t, Pepper. He hates me.”

A gentle hand suddenly caressed his cheek. When had Pepper become so affectionate like this. Her eyes worried for Tony, but the soft smile made him relax at her touch.

“No, that’s what you think. Some may call you a genius, but did they ever notice anything about your oblivion?” She stepped back, still slipping back and forth between Tony and Peter. “Was it he hid behind you when he saw me? He needs you, even if he doesn’t see it yet.”

“*Pepper*—!” he started desperately as she walked towards the stairs.

She turned, the clicking of her heel stopping. “Don’t worry, Tony. You’ll get there soon enough.”

She was gone in a flash. God knows where she got her attitude from, but Tony was starting to like it.

He spun in the chair, seeing that the kid was just finishing putting the last wire together and connecting the dots of each hole.

“You hungry, squirt?”

The kid stopped, a rigid stance—Tony couldn’t help but stare.

“No, sir...” His voice was muffled by his sleeve that was holding up against his lips questionable.

“I say you’re lying.” Tony decided it he’s to actually stand up and walk over to observe the kids more closely. The kid still had yet to relax his muscles. Even when Tony slipped into the chair opposite him, he refused to meet the Stark’s eyes. “What did you last eat?”

Peter shrugged. His tongue was dry. From what Tony could hear and see—he always had his mouth parted slightly with the light of his tongue tasting his upper-lip in typical concentration. Whenever he opened his mouth, that cringe-worthy smack of the dry salvia coated his mouth.

“*Tell me*, *Peter*.”

The sudden change in name seemed to startle Peter into wakefulness. His wide eyes met Tony’s in a grip of anxiety.

“What did you last eat?”

Peter shook his head again, but answered in a stutter, “J-just a couple of, uh, of-of fruits.”

He was telling the truth. It did nothing to satisfy the need in Tony to help the boy.

“Are you okay?”

Peter nodded.

“No you’re not. Tell me.”

He shook his head.

Tony figures he would not get anywhere if he were to grouch the kid any longer. It could make him explode, and a crying Peter is not something Tony wants in his hands. *Ever.*

“I never told anyone anything when I was your age.” Tony started off slowly, as to not spoke the kid too much. “In fact, not any age until I made some real friends.”

Peter’s brow creased, as if he didn’t want to listen to Tony’s beginning of a ramble. On the end of the receiving line, it takes Tony back decades ago when he was at school; when a kid would not stop babbling on about vacuous nonsense. He was trying to work—

“*I’m actually trying to fix something that only some with half-a-brain cannot do, by the looks of it. Can you kindly fuck off?*”

Maybe there was a reason why Tony never had any friends. For the most part, he didn’t want to get too close to someone. They only like him because of Howard Stark. For the money that grew on their trees.

“It’s sad, isn’t it?” He rambled on, nearly capturing the kid’s attention. “I’m forty-eight-years-old and I only really made some real friends a good ten years ago. That started with Happy—you don’t know him—and Rhodes! how could I forget him? Then there’s Pepper.”

Peter snapped the wire, his eyes drifting stubbornly at Tony to the circuit.

Tony continued: “I didn’t have a lot when I was younger” —Tony swore he just saw the hint of a glare from the boy and spluttered (which is very unlike him)— “What I mean is company. Yes, I had money, I had a roof over my head, I always went to bed with a scarified stomach. But me and you ... differences? You have ... you have people who care now for you.”

“You’re a good man...” mumbled Peter.

Tony smiles a little. “I may be now. I wasn’t back then. But a pro? Wanna know our similarities?”

For a second, Tony doubted Peter’s chance to open up a little more. A light flicker in his eyes told him to shut-up. Then, Peter finally lifted his head from out of the work. He didn’t stare into his eyes. Rather, his eyes looked right passed Tony. He didn’t say anything, but nodded mutely.

“We’re determined to get things done; we fight for what we can and will do. We fight for the ones we love.”

Peter swallowed tightly. Tony didn’t miss a beat and carried on—

“And you ... *you*, my kid, are one of kind. You really are. Hey, you like Star Wars. You don’t sleep until you’ve got your job done. And I was too like that. Do you understand me? You can talk to me. I’m not therapist, but I’m not sadist either, despite what the media makes me out to be.”

“You are a good man.” Peter sounded as if he’s just illustrated and confirmed it in his own mind. His eyes bore into Tony. He bit his lip, the scabs starting to open up. “I miss my friends.”

For the second time that day, Tony had to double check what he has just heard. Did the kid all of a sudden open up a gate that has been over flooding for weeks now?

“You miss your friends?” Tony repeated, dumb-founded. “Your friends?”

Peter nodded. “Friend, I mean. His name-his name is Ned. He, uh, we were like, you know? best friends. F-for years, we were—”

“Remember his contact number?” asked Tony.

Peter shook his head. “I-it’s not that. I-I can’t-I can’t see him, Mr. Stark. It’s not that, um ...” He swallowed again, trying to keep the lump in his throat at bay. “N-not that’s s-ss-simple.” The last word was a struggle. A crack caved in and he hunched over slightly. Defeated, he buried his head in his crossed arms, voice drifting in and out of pitch. “He can’t know where I am. He can’t know, Mr. Stark, he can’t—“

“Hey, kid, look at me.”

“H-he’ll hate me. I left him—”

“*Kid*.” He smacked his hand in the table, making the kid look up. Thankfully, no tears swam in the depths of his eyes. He wasn’t smile, more frowning. His lips sat in a straight, dead line, relaxed and effortless. “Kid, you listen to me—”

“I’m not a kid,” gritted Peter.

His emotions were breaking on the edge of a cliff right now, but Tony had to push forwards. Whatever was holding the kid down by the chain, it was time for him to simply break it, one-by-one.

“You are a kid, Peter. You need someone to help you. And I’m willing to bring back who you once loved. And who you need—“

“I need nobody.”

Tony smiles and again, with his surge of confidence, reached forwards and squeezed at the kid’s shoulder. The boy froze, but didn’t push away.

“Of course you do, squirt. Everyone needs someone.”

Chapter End Notes

thank you all who kept me motivated enough to write this. the next update, i promise, will be sooner rather than later like this one.

lot of love ♡

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“What is it? Another Hydra hideout?”

Peter listened closely. His ears tingled and his spidey-senses ran suddenly wild. He had the urge to flip the switch and swing his way on out of here. But not towards the tunnel’s like he normally had the desire to; no, this time, he wanted to follow in the Captain’s fierce footsteps and help them.

Tony’s voice drifted away and Peter found he had left the desk he was silently working at. He wandered out of the room and Peter couldn’t help but follow him.

Discretely, he trailed and stepped carefully on the toes which Tony left behind.

“Am I required?”

Peter stopped, heart in his throat. He knew it was an off-chance for him to go with them. He couldn’t risk the set of using his own skills as the once Spider-Man to take down a Hydra facility.

From when he was young, he vaguely remembers his parents talking in hushed voices about this mysterious ‘Hydra’ that they preferred to ignore Peter’s curious questions about. Likewise, in the news as well. So Hydra was no secret. You just needed to know where to look.

“Well, at least they’re not experimenting on humans.”

Peter continued to think rationally; he could sneak with them. Maybe he could grab his suit and be on with it. Plus, as much as he would hate to admit it, being here without Mr. Stark was maybe a little bit frightening. Only was it yesterday they had that little ‘bonding’ session. (If you could call it that). Peter felt a million times better after. Telling someone that he missed his life-long best friend is something he has never done. It’s the closest he has ever come to telling a thing so personal. And it felt good. He felt good. But only to Mr. Stark.

“I know animals aren’t that much better, but what is—”

He was cut off by a shrill, low voice on the other end. Peter couldn’t exactly pick up on what they were saying, but they were urgent. They needed backup immediately.

“Alright—I’ve got a *kid* with me—it *is* an excuse, Fury! I’m not leaving him in my workshop!”

Peter recoiled at the statement. Mr. Stark still didn’t trust him? Even though he himself was starting to trust the Stark. This only motivated him more to come out from the man’s shadows. He stepped forward.

“I guess I could tell him to go home...”

“I can help, Mr. Stark.”

He wishes he could take that back. It just came out. The words spilled like projectile vomit, unstoppable from the doubt he felt for himself.

Mr. Stark turned, his expression of annoyance crossing his features. Peter screamed at himself to stop, but he couldn’t help it. From the food he’s had today and the amount of water he has taken

advantage of, it's giving him an adrenaline rush. On the plus, he hasn't been on a mission before—he has only stopped his little crimes he has mastered. He needs the rush again. He needs to do this.

Mr. Stark laughed. He actually laughed. That trust is wearing thin, and Peter felt humiliated. What else did he expect? He was no superhero. He may of used to be, but he only did that to protect May. And he couldn't even do that.

"Kid, stay outta' this, alright?" Mr. Stark covered the phone when speaking and then pushed it against his ear again. It was a little ... flip-phone? No, it was some sort of technology that Peter is definitely not aware of. "Who's going?"

Peter stepped in again, his hands shaking and heart pumping in his throat. "I can. Y-you have to trust me." He could help. He can protect them.

Mr. Stark shook his head, ignoring him by turning around. "Fury—Yes, yes, I got you—"

"Mr. Stark?" Peter said, more desperately.

The man sighed in frustration, taking the phone away from his head again. Peter gulped uneasily. He was pissing the man off. The reason why he wanted to do this is so he could get better at protecting those he loves. He's thinking of the kids. Moreover, the chances of them placing faith in him? It's a bonus. He needs more money. He needs more of everything to help his kids.

"Look, kid," started Mr. Stark, "You're a genius, and I can see; there is no doubt about that. I can keep you in my workshop all I want for you to invent and repair. That's all there is to it. But..." The man sighed, obviously preparing for the worst. Peter looked down, cheeks burning. "You're a skinny little runt, okay? And I mean that in the nicest way as possible. I don't need you getting hurt on my conscience."

Something about that last sentence wanted to force Peter's lips up into a gratitude-worthy smile. However, the praise was muted by the static in his mind. Mr. Stark was angry at him. Not only that, but Mr. Stark thought he was too weak, too defenceless. Does the man not see that Peter has been living on the streets for a very long time now?

Peter watched helplessly as Mr. Stark started walking away. He wasn't going to let the man get away that easily.

Swiftly, he followed him, not quietly, but Mr. Stark was too distracted by the phone to even notice his shadow. And soon, when they coming up the stairs, Peter saw that most of the Avengers were already preparing to take down the Hydra goons.

"Cap not here?" Mr. Stark said.

"I'm here!"

Peter held back a smile as a fever-tainted Captain America stumbled into the room. His blonde mane of hair was wildly choppy and sweaty, it caking his flushed cheeks and shivering body.

"What is the matter with you?" demanded Mr. Stark.

"Wanda is as highly advanced as any other experiment," said Sam casually. He turned to Wanda with an apologetic look. "The fever they've induced is enough to bring a super soldier down."

Bucky visibly took a huge step back from Mr. Rogers. "You dare touch me and I kill you."

“What is the kid doing here?” says Black Widow. All of a sudden, their eyes were on him. He might as well jump out from the walls he was hiding behind. He found that Mr. Stark didn’t look annoyed anymore. If anything, he looked done trying to convince the kid to back off. And was that a smirk flashing on his lips? Peter didn’t stare long enough to find out, because Sam sighed.

“You’ve not only hired the little brat to—”

“*Sam*.” Mr. Rogers croaked pathetically. Natasha smiles smugly at him.

“—work on your freaky technology, but you’ve also hired him to steal more of our things and come on missions with us.”

Bucky grimaced, not looking at Peter, but at an unamused Mr. Stark. “I mean, that’s low, even for you.”

Mr. Stark breathed out from his nose, trying not to lose his cool. “I told him to back off—”

“Looks like this kid was never disciplined,” said Bucky. “Back in my day—”

“*Yes*, we get it!” snapped the Black Widow. Bucky backed off, sending a long glance Sam’s way. Peter appreciated her dominating tone. The young woman stepped forwards, a kind shine in her green eyes. A bolt hit Peter—though the eyes may not be dark like his Aunt May’s was, they had the same empathetic and kind gaze to them. And he yearned to reach out to the Black Widow and let her hold him. Besides, they both have spider in their names.

“You up for a task, little one?” She reached out and patted him on the shoulder. Beside her, Mr. Stark spluttered and the others stared in shock.

“Natasha!” Bucky gaped at her, metal arm—whoa, Peter cannot get over that shiny, metal arm—in mock confusion, eyebrows set in a deep frown. “What the fuck?”

Mr. Rogers cast a disapproving look and the soldier shrugged.

“Romanoff...” She looked at Mr. Stark. She still had that mischievous glint in her eyes. It reflected the forest from outside, reminding Peter of the kid’s back home. “He’s a kid.”

“And a kid willing to do the job,” she shot back.

Oh ... *Oh*!

Peter remembers the incident yesterday. The Black Widow looked ashamed by what Hawkeye had said about him. It was guilt she was tripping over here. But, Peter couldn’t bring himself to care. With the encouragement from her, he may be allowed to do this; to prove himself worthy.

Mr. Stark was still bewildered on what to do, which was rare. He took one look at Mr. Rogers, then back at Peter. It was almost off-putting, the way Mr. Stark was looking at him. In a concerned and ... and fatherly way. The look made him shiver; he hasn’t seen that look since ... since Uncle Ben...

“*Look at me*, *Pete. Hey*, *please*, *l-look at me*...”

Peter looked away, his only option to be at Black Widow. He’s taller than her by a few inches.

(Living on the streets disrupted his growth, and he’s never been a tall person, so he was cursed with being short and small from the start. He hasn’t even caught up to Mr. Stark. However, he didn’t realise how short Black Widow was. Some of the smallest girls are the most fiery).

“No.” Mr. Stark said. And now he was looking at Romanoff. “This isn’t a good idea. What superpower does he have? Are you crazy, Romanoff?”

“He wants it—”

Sam and Bucky barked out a laugh. Peter blushed uncomfortably.

“Don’t take that out of context, you *dicks*,” said the weird girl. Peter recalls her name to be Wanda? Or, as the media called her, Scarlet Witch. He can’t remember. He’s sure she used to have a twin brother.

They all turned back to Black Widow. She was still gently holding him by his shoulder; eyes still kind and the colours of ocean waves; Peter almost found himself getting lost in them. She’s like Aunt May. She feels like Aunt May. A lump formed in his throat. He needs to control the waterfalls he is portraying lately. It is getting rather out of hand. An emotional mess is not what he wants to present himself as.

Mr. Stark finally stepped up, taking Peter’s shoulder and dragging him away from Black Widow. She let go, taking her own small steps back to give the two space. Mr. Stark looked down slightly. His gaze was unreadable, help for the tiny glint of not accepting the offered help.

“What makes you so willing you can do this, kid?” he asked seriously. “I’m not trying to be funny, but this is a course for someone who has skills.”

“Not to mention this is a Hydra Hideout,” commented Bucky. This time, it was said in an earnest pit of disquiet. He sighed wholeheartedly, coming over. He only stopped when Tony sent him a warning glare. “See, squirt? Someone like you couldn’t possibly help us.”

“He managed to outrun us multiple times.” Wanda blew on her nails, raising an eyebrow at Bucky who huffed out an annoyed breath.

“She has a point,” said Romanoff.

“Fuckin’ hell,” grumbled Bucky, going back to his place between Sam and Mr. Rogers.

Mr. Stark put his hands up in a mock shrug. He refused to even look at Peter as he made his way to the middle. “Well, he’s not my responsibility.”

Peter frowned. The bitter cold that split the air laced through everyone’s ears at that. Romanoff came forwards again and tenderly put her arm around Peter’s shoulders. She slowly let him stand in her place between her and Wanda whilst Mr. Stark led them all the the start of their attack. Peter let himself lose and fall between Romanoff and Wanda. They were already ready and able to go. The clothes he was wearing weren’t exactly fresh, but they would do. This was also the perfect opportunity to prove himself worthy. Romanoff stopped him short before they all climbed onto the small helicarrier. It was so motherly the way she looked at him. He wanted to reach out and drain the discomfort in her eyes, only to jump slightly when her hand came up to caress his face.

“I’m sorry about Hawkeye yesterday,” she whispered gently. “You’ll be okay, right?”

Peter nodded confidently. He was as stubborn as a mule at time, from what Aunt May had always stated, but his chance to prove himself is high. Not to mention, his smuggled web-shooters tucked warmly inside of the sleeve of his jumper. Without the Avengers keeping an eye on him

(who is he kidding? None of them apart from Doctor Banner and Mr. Rogers and Romanoff have paid care for him)

he will be able to take out any Hydra goons with no trace of failure.

To his surprise, Wanda came along and took a hold of his hand, squeezing comfortingly. They headed together on the helicarrier. Peter gaped in awe. Everything screamed new and improved technology. It was dark with the right amount of light filtering through the windows. Wanda set him down on a seat, and she sat next to him. It was only then that Peter realised she was busy glaring at the back of Mr. Stark's head. Mr. Rogers was standing up too, a little light on his feet, with Sam sniggering that he could outrun a simple flu but a super soldier can't. He was chatting quietly to Tony, but the man kept on flipping him off with the wave of his hand.

Peter sat silently, carefully listening and watching Mr. Stark as they flew.

As this was happening, Mr. Rogers came over when Wanda went to talk to Sam for a while about something. Romanoff and Bucky were with Mr. Stark and that's all that remained of the team.

Mr. Rogers took a seat next to Peter, turning a bit so he was facing the boy.

"How long have you been like this?" he asked. He had a struggle in his stance, limbs by his hands shaking a little. He's a super soldier, so Peter can't help but be a little curious at the blondes anxious fiddling.

Peter stood a little astounded at the question. What could he possibly be talking of? Had Peter shown any signs ...?

No. The blonde wasn't stupid, unfortunately.

"I don't know exactly what you do..." the man started off slowly. He looked to the side for a moment before trying to catch Peter's own eyes again. Peter didn't want to look at him. "I'm not gonna pretend I know all of your secrets, beside I don't. But I know how you out-ruled them. Only someone with great power can hold that strength, and you obviously can. Lastly, you wouldn't risk your life to come to a Hydra Hideout."

Peter shifted in his seat, savouring the warmth it brought until they would be exposed to the chilly cold again.

"I'm safe to assume you're gonna be okay?"

Peter nodded mutely. Then decided that wasn't enough. "I'm going to be okay."

Mr. Rogers only gave him a small, sad smile in return before getting up from the chair and taking the next one opposite. A pained expression crossed his features, giving Peter an odd vibe of distress. Lately, the Captain has been ungraceful to watch his feet and sauntered around aimlessly. Whether that was the effects of what Peter is currently putting him through, or the flu he caught was one heck of a fever to up-bring.

In other words, Mr. Rogers should sit this one out.

They arrived much sooner than Peter was anticipating. Only now was he feeling the impact on bringing the burden on his shoulders. An elephant definitely did not lay low when he stood up on wobbly legs, ready to discretely take off from the moving vehicle in the sky. They wouldn't be jumping out, much to his relief. Their plan was to hover above the high grounds, as, it turns out as any other typically villain, they adore the underground.

A rope was wrapped securely around Peter's waist—too tightly, just he add—by Mr. Stark. Still, he engaged in conversation and did not look at Peter.

Mr. Rogers and Bucky toppled over the ledge, hopefully landing in a secure position. Sam followed shortly after and Mr. Stark suited up. He turned his head for just a second. Too cowardly to look Peter through his real eyes instead of the cold, metal glass.

“On my lead.”

Romanoff nodded. She patted Peter on the back just as Mr. Stark went flying off. As soon as he had, down went Wanda who was then followed by Romanoff. Peter held out his hands in a stretch and felt the adrenaline pumping wildly through his veins. With one, swift kick, he was jumping from the plane. The ropes felt oddly like the web fluids he uses to swing and stable himself. So when he flew through the air, wind tangling his matted curls, he landed gracefully and quietly to the floor, bending slightly to match Black Widow’s pose. She looked impressed whilst clipping off the rope. He mimicked her actions.

Only him, Black Widow and Wanda are on ground level. Bucky and Mr. Rogers must have gone round the back and Falcon and Iron Man flew high above, casting visions and lazers through each possible entrance.

“C’mon, kid,” whispered Romanoff, still in a crouching position as they ran towards the front entrance. She had her gun poised in her grip, securely seated on her hip. Wanda flew idly by, her weird, scarlet lighting brushing the remains of the ground.

Inside was an empty warehouse. Abandoned, it seemed. But they all knew better.

“Check, Peter,” said Wanda. Both the girls went in opposite directions.

Peter found another entrance door by a window. He found his spidey-senses were tingling non-stop and a shiver ran dreadfully up his spine. It was this door. Hand flat against the crusted pain work, he pushed it open with force, cringing at the loud creak it made when the metal cracked under the brink of collapse. A hiss of a hush came his way and found Wanda glaring at him.

“No, here...” he said lowly, as to not cause a disturbance. She made a face at him and he gestured towards the running stairs. It was pitch black at the bottom, but it must lead to some hide out.

“You found it?” she said uncertainly. His adding look as convinced as he would want her to be.

Before he could get another word out, something jostled him. Hands pushed at his chest and tackled him to the ground. On impact, he hit his head on the concreted floor.

Great, he thought dazedly, *add that to the hundred list of injuries I have had this week.*

There were cries and shouts. The person on top left, only for there to be others. He wasn’t so used to missions anymore. Moreover, he wasn’t used to fighting crimes for a while now. How long has it been? Two months? Maybe more.

Peter shook at the negatives of not avenging his own ground and forced his eyes to open. When face-to-face with the man in front of him, his first reflex is to kick, and that’s what he did. He just prayed that neither Black Widow nor Scarlet Witch was how strong he was, because that man went tumbling down the stairs, slamming into other on the way down. He jumped up on his hind, feet balancing uneasily before situating himself a straight pose. He found Wanda had just crushed the inside of one’s skull and Romanoff had knocked a couple unconscious.

“Guys, we got location. Peter found the door.” The Black Widow said through her ear-piece, gravitating towards Peter.

They looked down the doorway, finding no one else coming forwards to assault them. Peter looked confidently at the two young women and nodded his head. Romanoff smirked at him, giving him a wink of gratitude before being the leader. Wanda and Peter followed closely behind.

The hallways were dark, only lit by a few yellow lights. At the moment, Peter thanked that his sensors were not dialled up to 11. If they were, the constant blinking light would be irritating enough to drive him into overstimulating. Black Widow cast the shadows behind them, her back bent at an angle Peter could easily flex on. Maybe that's why he's mistaken for a girl a lot of the time. But she very nearly touched the floors when sneaking around. On instinct, Peter started running the flat of his palms across the walls, becoming sticky to the touch until he was eventually —subconsciously—crawling up the wall. He knew it was a risk. So he managed to grasp hold of the lights onto the wall and the many holes plastered through them.

It was still unfairly quiet. The two girls below him managed to stay within their mouse-like feet on the cold, damp floor. They have yet to notice his sudden leap of faith.

A low groan of a door slamming shut startled them all. Peter looked back, and saw both Bucky and Mr. Rogers stumbling in. Before the girls could look around, another round of attack endured. Peter sensed that this time, it would be a long run to the experiment lab.

Hydra soldiers came around the corner and Peter kicked off of the wall, tumbling into one on the floor unexpectedly. They gave a cry and Peter whipped his head to the other entrance door they came piling out of. Peter quickly followed out there, unraveling his web-shooters and clinging onto the ceiling. The others were still fighting off the few that came around. And as Peter crawled along the ceiling, he shot webs at each of them, disarming their guns, tying them up and making them trip over in advance to not distract the others.

He was doing fine.

Once he made it inside the actual room, he gasped at the huge scale it was. Animals in cages, asleep—or dead, Peter shivered—lined up up at all the walls. There was already a fight scene going on. Falcon and Iron Man had broken in more-or-less from the top. Peter jumped down before anyone could spot him. After him came Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, Captain America and the Winter Soldier.

"Kid, *look out*!" came Mr. Stark's panicked voice.

Peter dodged a gun aimed at him, sliding underneath the man and kicking him in the back. The others joined in, clearly in distress of the amount of Hydra Agents roaming the place. There has to be a couple of dozens.

"Someone, get the animals!"

That was Mr. Rogers. Peter figured to show less of his superpowers he would have to show the simple life. Avoiding the goons is the most brash part.

As quiet as a mouse compared to each of the Avengers, he slipped passed the others and got to the live, awake and alert animals. Kittens were meowing, puppies yapping in fright. Peter opened doors, hoping any of them would lead to a runaway. One did, only the outside of it was dark, and Peter had no way of telling whether or not it led to the outside or not.

Screw it, he thought and started unlocking each and every cage he could. He has never seen animals run so fast and out of the doors. He didn't have time to do all of them, as there must have been at least fifty, when someone pushed him in the back. He fell forwards with a dull *thud*, not

enough to drown out the floods of noise the others were making and trying to grab as many animals as they could. With a leap, he kicked out and startled the man above into shock before looking around himself.

“Wanda!” He found himself screeching and hurtled himself over to her. She had enough time to find his voice before he was easily blocking the huge shield that was about to crush her bloody. He only let out a sharp whimper of discomfort at the metal digging into his protective forearms. He pushed back, making the Agent topple over onto his ass before Peter aimlessly kicked away the shield.

Wanda looked at him in amazement at what she had just witnessed. And Peter only just missed her happy praise before he had to suddenly suffer a heavy blow to his head in order to shield Bucky from a brutal punch that the man didn’t see coming.

Protect the Avengers. That will gain their trust.

It changed like a chorused song stuck in his head. Every time one needed help, he was there: he shot webs discreetly, he tripped up the masters, he blocked punches, dodged bullets, ran as the wild beast in a hunt.

By the end of it, everyone was clearly exhausted. Praises from that man Mr. Stark was taking to earlier were ringing down the phone. Everyone packed up. Black Widow hid Peter behind her when Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D—Agents of *S.H.I.E.L.D*, Peter shadowed in his mind in awe—came to shut the place down.

Doctor Banner picked them up in the helicarrier with ease and took Peter aside. It seemed he had no time to treat Mr. Stark’s light wound on his arms or Mr. Rogers’ delirious state. Instead, he tended to the bruises that were slowly beginning to bump on Peter’s skin and the nasty cut covered by the curls on his head. He hasn’t even noticed it was there.

“You did a good job,” mumbled Doctor Banner. “That doesn’t excuse the fact you’re still a kid though.”

Peter wanted to argue, but sealed him lips in a thin line.

“How is that boy?”

Peter went rigid in Doctor Banner’s hold. Harry ... oh God, all of them—it felt as if he hasn’t seen them in ages. Normally after having a little sleep at the Compound, he returns home. However, this time, he’s stayed the entire day. That is two whole days away from his kids.

“Is he feeding well?”

Peter swallowed the bile of guilt and played along the strings gently.

“Y-yes sir.”

It was a lie. His friends were stealing his money, so he has to steal over and over again. For the kids. It’s all for the kids because he will do anything for them. They can’t realise something is wrong, so he uses the hands his dear mother and father blessed him with to dirty them in the process.

“Then how do I know you’re telling lies?”

Peter shook his head, pulling his arm away from the doctor. “He’s fine.”

“There’s more, kid, I know,” said Doctor Banner. He decided to sit next to Peter, knowing he was too stubborn to allow the doctor to look at any more injuries. But Peter has a feeling he will jab at him when the get back to the Compound ... that is, if Peter doesn’t swing his way home. “How many?”

How did he know?

The doctor must have read the expression on his face because he proceeded the subject gently, his eyes soft and smile sad.

“The food you take, it can’t just be fed for two people. One may be a growing boy, but the rest can’t be for yourself. You’ve got a family to feed.”

“Yes.” Peter nodded nervously, the sweat on his palms begging to be exposed to fresh air. “They, uh, they’re y-young, sir. Th-they need food.”

“They do need food,” agreed the man. “I’m not saying ... You know? I’m not saying for you to give up on feeding them. But ... Peter, look at me.”

Peter obeyed, the heat in his cheeks rising from being slightly patronised without willingly meaning to.

“They still have a chance. Foster homes, what-not. They don’t have to live out there—”

“They can’t—” started Peter desperately. The sweat broke, coating the back of his neck and soaking his curls.

“I know you don’t wanna be alone, Peter,” said Bruce. He let his hand come to Peter’s shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. “But that’s why you have us. So think, Peter, *think*.”

Peter stared, perlexed, as Doctor Banner moved onto Wanda’s own injuries. Did Doctor Banner just offer full time hospitality? Did he just offer to help the kids? Or did he suggest both in one, single sentence?

Chapter End Notes

the comments ... ahh, the comments!! bless you all, thank you so so much! they kept me well motivated and happy!! can’t thank you all enough.

again, i know this chapter wasn’t very exciting, but, again, i promise, it gets more interesting. the suspense is killing me too, but i don’t wanna rush it xD

lot of love <3

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony had a hard time actually tracking Peter's friend, Ned, down. All he knew from the kid is that he's Asian, his full name is Edward Leeds and he went to Peter's old High School. Whether the boy is still there, he has no record of that. They don't post students I.D.'s up on the internet for privacy reasons.

For a few weeks now, he's been trying to come in contact with Ned. Peter has only been around a couple of times these past three weeks, which, in a way, didn't worry Tony. This was mainly because he knew the kid can look after himself. And he had a feeling the reason why he was avoiding everyone is because how Tony acted around him on that Hydra Hideout mission. It wasn't even something big; a little baby mission that Tony and Steve could have take down by themselves. But Fury, for safety reasons, decided it best to take nearly the whole team with them. Never did he plan on the kid coming with them. But ever since he found Peter protecting not only Wanda and Natasha with highly advanced skills, he found him defending Sam and Bucky too, even after all the insults they have thrown at him.

Now, both young men haven't really jabbed at Peter since. The last time he came round, which was a good two weeks ago, they greeted him with a polite, "Hey". Which nearly shocked Tony from his skin.

He should have known this mission was the kid's way to prove himself.

A little gratitude of surprise fell from his lips when the screen in front of him blinked.

"Boss, I have found face recognition on Edward Leeds." F.R.I.D.A.Y.s voice came to sense in his mind.

The boy's image popped up on the screen. He was in fact Asian, a little plump and had a sweet smile on his face. His age is eighteen-years-old, a month away from being nineteen. That said to Tony that he was preparing to leave for University.

His grades are outstanding. Especially his Maths and Science, expecting the awesome B's and A's on his papers. It looks like both of them bonded first over their nerdy love for science. This means that Peter is only about eighteen-years-old. The realisation suddenly hit Tony like a brick. That's how young the kid is. He is literally only a kid.

"Fuck..." Tony breathed out a heavy sigh, pushing himself up off the chair whilst swiping at his coffee mug and sowing half of the lukewarm contents.

"Boss, Doctor Banner is waiting at the entrance."

Tony swooped around, nearly dropping his coffee in the process. Bruce came in with a shy look hidden in his eyes whilst the rest of his stance remained confident and welcomed. It's something Bruce has never been able to master, but it will do for now. Tony knows that look; Bruce wants to have a little chat with him.

"You need a chat?" said Tony casually. It felt as if this whole thing is continuously dragging on and Tony is literally reaching his breaking point. He isn't patient like Bruce is; he likes finding the answers as soon as possible. "Because I'm kinda busy—"

“Looking for Ned Leeds? I know, Tony.”

Tony rolled his eyes, sitting back down again. “Why is out you know everything?”

“I feel as if I have more of a connection with Peter than you. In a good way, obviously.” He stuttered among his words, not bothering to sit down. “Did you know he has a kid?”

That came out wrong, Tony knew. The kid couldn’t possible have his own kid. “In what way?” Tony still asks, just in case.

Bruce took a deep breath in, as if he were about to reveal Peter’s biggest secret to him. And maybe he was.

“He actually has quite a few—to look after, I mean. They’re homeless, just like him. And he provides for them.”

“*Jesus Christ*.” Tony didn’t mean for it to come out so bluntly, but it’s not as if he was expecting that. So, Peter wasn’t exactly alone. He made his own path when he coped with the streets.

Bruce nodded a little, his curls vibrating around his head. “That’s why whenever he comes to us, he looks gaunt, as if he hasn’t eaten himself. That’s because he’s constantly giving the goods to the kids.”

“Have you made an arrangement?” pressed Tony. This is almost ridiculous. He didn’t realise the extent of homeless kids—kids, of anything. It is strange, in a way. “Those kids could be easily given in—”

“That’s what I’m saying!” Bruce burst out. “I’ve agreed to somewhat help him. It’s difficult for him, but for the kids he’s looking after, easier said than done, yes, but it can work. He just needs to trust us.”

“Giving him Ned Leeds is our best shot,” said Tony, turning back to the screen. “It was his best friend back before he disappeared. I only need to come in contact with the kid and it’ll be fine. I managed to get Peter to tell me.”

It felt almost bad to talk of Peter behind his back like this. But it isn’t as if they are saying anything so terrible that they should feel shame.

“Are we at a deal, then?” said Bruce. “There are five kids. Not sure what age the youngest and oldest are. But I’m right in saying they’re definitely all under ten-years-old. No doubt about that.”

“You mean for me to help them too?” said Tony, a little put off. It is playing down-right mean, but he’s not good with kids. He’s got the money to do the job, but without the actual money, he’s shit at this sort of thing.

“You can do it. And it’ll make him happy.”

“Are you sure?”

Bruce has to do a double take. From what they have both observed closely of Peter, he is constantly in a fragile mind-set. Anything done or said out of place will freak him out. Taking the kids away from his only home of comfort would unsettle him to a great degree. They would have to do something about that.

“Are you sure it’ll make him happy?” he repeated solemnly.

“It’s for the best,” said Bruce. “He will know they are safe.”

Tony groaned and put his head back down on the desk. This is almost more difficult than running a whole company.

“I’ll have to think about it.”

It was a tricky situation, to say the least. Bruce left without saying anything else. Tony sat there for a good five minutes with Dum-E in the background whirling and trying to cause a distraction. It should have been an easy enough option to decide between Ned and the kids. But Peter needs them both.Perhaps at this moment, Ned is definitely the best option. They haven’t seen each-other in a couple of years, and it would be a healthy start for Peter.

Tony logged within the depths of Ned’s profile.

He lives in the parts of Queens, where Peter usually resides. He lives in a high up, three bedroom apartment. He lived as an only child of a mother and father, and seemed to keep up with grades and live up to the praises teachers give him on his report. Tony wondered briefly what Peter would be like at school if he was still there.

It was late afternoon when the familiar chant of the office bell was rung. The routine was becoming almost second nature to Tony as he took the lift, walked down, greeted the kid and came back upstairs.

The A.I. he was fixing up was prepared by Peter a couple of weeks ago now. So, in reality, there was nothing Tony needed him to do at the moment. He figured this was the perfect opportunity to talk to the kid before anything else happened.

“Hey, squirt,” said Tony, approaching Peter. The boy was standing up. Clothes were wrinkled from a river-wash to a sun dry. His face today didn’t show any hint of dirt for once, but his hair was coated each layer with grease. “You need a shower?”

He didn’t want to outright say, “Go and take a shower” because even Tony knew how malicious and disrespectful that sounded. Although, even from afar, it was obvious the kid needed the heat of the rain and soap suds to go with it, Tony still didn’t want to push the boundaries.

Peter blushed at this. He always felt embarrassed when needing a shower. But Tony felt better about himself when he offered. And it isn’t as if he cared. Humans need to stay hygienic.

“I-if you don’t ... if you don’t mind...” mumbled Peter.

Tony smiled. “Of course I don’t mind. Just give me your bag. I’ll - uh - I’ll put out some new clothes for you.”

They never actually once have offered the kid brand new clothes. They always took his old ones and washed them before placing them back on the bed. Peter never really took his time in the shower, so they never washed them then. But sometimes, he would take advantage of bubble-bath time (Tony sees the evidence of lose bubbles surfacing the bathtub) and they would have plenty of time to wash his clothes.

At the suggestion, spittle left Peter’s parted lips in a gasp. As if shocked by Tony’s hospitality.

“N-no, Mr. Stark—”

“Ah, ah, that's where I’m gonna stop you right there, kid.” His arm automatically made its way

around Peter's shoulders, pulling the tense boy to his side in comfort. "I would feel more comfortable if you wore newer clothes. Maybe it would make you feel more ... uh, more open, to this place? Yeah? See what I'm gettin' at?"

Peter nodded vigorously. Curls that should commonly shake and lick at his neck, stay in place, matted against the grim his skin is savouring. He needed a shower, as soon as possible.

He led the boy to the spare bedroom Peter stays in. Peter put his dirty bag on the floor, scratching at his hands in a nervous persona. Tony noticed they were almost red raw.

"I've gotta talk to you after, alright?" said Tony cautiously. "At the moment, there is no work for you to endure."

Peter looked like a deer caught in headlights. He started to talk, but Tony cut him off before he could even utter a single syllable.

Then Stark only chuckled lightly, patting the kid's shoulder. "Don't look so afraid, boy..."

You should be afraid.

"Go freshen up, okay? I'll even make you some dinner."

This drew a smirk from the boy; the faintest one that made Tony's heart beat ten times more from pride.

I did that, he thought proudly. *I made that damn kid smile.*

"You? You can cook, sir?" said Peter. His smile was long gone, but a certain alighted spark was dancing beyond his colouring eyes. "That's a-a, uh, great joke."

Despite his stutter, it endeared Tony to hear it. Was the kid bantering back for once?

Tony gasped, pulling a hand to his chest, offended. "How dare thee speak of this! I shall not stand for this maltreatment!"

Peter again smiled, leaning over a bit so his head went onto Tony's shoulder. He realised his mistake and pushed back, having Tony let go of his shoulder.

"Well, um, I ... I, uh, I'm gonna go and ... you know?" Peter's blush was spreading across his entire face and down his neck, then colouring the tip of his ears pink. Tony wanted to rid of the tension. He sent a friendly punch to Peter's shoulder lightly, Peter placed a hand over the offended bit, but cast a glance at Tony.

He was trusting him; he was beginning to trust him. Tony could see that in his phantom eyes. They were slowly regaining a normal brown spark that should have stayed with him until he at least reached his mid-life crisis.

Tony took the kids bag and he headed for his room. The Stark then went into his own room, still a couple doors down from Peter's and placed it down by the corner of his bed. The kid needed a new rucksack as well. There were rips and shreds holing the bag in pieces.

The decision of giving the kid some new clothes was not out-of-the-blue. In fact, he had it planned for a while now. Because when he went into his extra pairs of drawers, he found the clothes he was looking for. He may not know the exact sizing of Peter, but he made a pretty good guess. The kid was a good couple of inches shorter than Tony, and he was much skinnier, so Tony would say his

sizing is quite accurate.

The first he pulled out was a checkered button up with a collar. A white vest can go with it. And with it a light blue, long-sleeved sweater. The trousers that came with it were normal black jeans. He also went out of his way to grab a new pair of shoes. The shoes were simple, good-to-go trainers.

If Tony knew Peter was going to stay here instead of going back onto the streets, he would of gladly bought Peter designer stuff. But, that is precious money wasted. Despite Tony having money to burn, he thinks he should save those little presents for a special occasion.

They got off to a bad—no, terrible start, but Tony is seriously in danger of growing too fond of the kid. There were many traits of the kid that Tony wish he had; kind, considerate, quiet, shy. However, that was something the kid never used to have. Tony could see it; he could see the way Peter wanted to burst out with a load of useless questions and nonsense. But, the streets have silenced him into skittishness and vulnerability.

He left it a good five minutes later when getting Peter's new clothes out before making his way to Peter's room. He knocked, just in case the kid was still in there. After getting no response, he opened the door and swiftly walked into the room. He saw the boy's clothes neatly folded on his bed which made Tony smile. He put the new clothes down and lifted the old ones.

He carried them from the room.

"Hey, Tony."

The Stark turned to see Steve walking down the hall. He has recovered a little from his super soldier fever, which Natasha gladly nicknamed. Tony is no doctor like Bruce, but it doesn't take a genius to work out exactly what was wrong with Steve. He's just been having a substandard couple of months ever since what happened. And it takes a lot for Steve to curl into himself and let his depressive clouds haze his mind.

"You okay, Cap?" asked Tony. They walked slowly along side each-other. Steve's steps were slower than normal.

"Yeah, thanks," said Steve. "How's the kid?"

Tony shrugged. "He's okay. In his kind of way."

Steve nodded, understanding what Tony is supposedly getting at. It was also a gesture to carry on.

"I'm gonna wash these for him."

"They're wrecked."

"Yeah, but, I don't wanna throw 'em away. They're his clothes. They could mean something to him."

The jumper that Peter wore most often must mean something. It was the least damaged of all of his clothes.

"I laid some new clothes for him. Then I'm gonna talk to him."

"What about?"

They entered the laundry room. Tony easily slipped the clothes inside of the washing machine and started getting all of the normal liquids to help freshen the clothes.

“Right...” Tony trailed off. It was possible Steve knew about the kids. But, he wasn’t so sure. He might as well tell the blonde; he wasn’t one to gossip or talk secrets. In fact, Steve was incredibly serious about keeping ones secrets. Tony turned to Steve, his body stiff and anxious.

Steve frowned at him. “Are you okay, Tony?”

The Stark nodded. “You gotta keep this from the kid, alright?” He pressed this with emphasis; Tony wasn’t as earnest with everything he was told. Peter deserved his privacy, though, “I’m only telling you because you need to know.”

Steve only nodded. His arms crossed over his chest, eyes straight forward, a sign worth knowing that the soldier is listening.

For a long story short, Tony went on to tell Steve of the kids that Peter is looking after. He made sure to mention that Bruce was the one who told him all of this. It wasn’t that he thought the Doctor was lying—far from it—but he wasn’t there, so he can’t assume.

The reason he steals ... the reasons he lies ... the reason he *hates* the thought of help...

Even as Tony is explaining everything to Steve, all the while walking back to the living area, it all pieces together inside of his head.

“...and that’s why ... that is why...” Tony faded out, causing Steve to put a hand on his shoulder to steady him. “Fuck...” he mumbled to himself.

“Tony?” said Steve gently.

Tony started up at Steve, his brown eyes bulging. “He’s protecting those kids from someone.”

Steve led the Stark over to the kitchen. Tony leaned over the counter, not even taking a second glance at the coffee machine.

“I would have thought,” said Steve thoughtfully. “They’re ... they’re out on the streets, Tony. Of course he’s protecting them from people.”

“No no...” Tony shook his head. He squeezed his eyes shut for a brief second, hands coming up to rub at his tired eyes. “He’s shielding them from the streets, yes. But there is particular persons he is safeguarding them from.”

Sam and Bucky chose that the perfect time to walk in. They had overheard what he was saying.

“You thinking there, Sherlock?” said Sam.

The two sat down on the stalls. Bucky picked at an apple, carefully listening in.

“So ... the kids got kids?”

Steve sent Bucky a disapproving look. Bucky shrugged at him, taking a bit of the green fruit.

Tony didn’t exactly want to talk to the other two about this. However, the deed has already been done. Maybe Steve can fill them in. Then again, it’s none of their business.

Tony announced his goodbye. Sam protested but Tony flipped him off. He didn’t really want to

deal with them. Peter must be all washed up by now, and he wanted to be there for him. He didn't want Peter wondering around in brand new clothes; a luxury that he possibly hasn't felt in years.

Luckily, as soon as he started walking down the hall, Peter opened the door and out he came.

His hair damp, curls sticking up and clean. His face a little red from the warm water and Tony's heart simply squeezed at the sight of how adorable the kid looked. The sweater came over his hands, flopping over edge of his tiny fingers. Checkered collars really suited him as well, with it hanging over the v-neck of the sweater and curls sweeping across his neck into the fabric.

"Hey..." Tony didn't mean for it to come out as a coo, but it did. In a disgustingly fatherly way, he realised.

Peter recoiled a little, bit still smiled lightly at him. "Hi, Mr. Stark."

Once again, as a little habit, Tony brought Peter forwards and under his arm. They walked, all the while being in a comfortable silence. Instead of going to the lab, Toby drags him to his bedroom. It's quiet, away from any forest noise and the sun is not longer shining obnoxiously this afternoon.

"Mr. Stark? Am I ... am I, uh—"

"Hey, shh, don't worry." Tony let him sit down on his bed. The boy's feet could touch the floor, so they were left hanging only furthering Tony's belief that this kid is a *child*. He just needed to get straight to the point. There is no need to sugarcoat this.

"I know about your kids."

...

"I haven't known for a while, literally since this morning. But this ... something like this, kid, is getting out of hand. I can help you—"

"Who told you?" demanded Peter.

Tony froze. He's never heard Peter so abrupt. So ... *angry*. He finally allowed himself to view Peter in his mind, and those eyes, so dark and so full of hatred.

"*Who told you?*" he repeated angrily.

Tony wasn't about to throw Bruce under the bus. But, unfortunately, Peter is a smart kid.

A bitter laugh ripples through the room. "It was Doctor Banner, wasn't it, Mr. Stark?"

Silence.

"*Wasn't it?!*"

Tony sent a sharp look Peter's way. "Calm down, kid. Don't you want help?"

Peter stood up. He's never seen the kid so angry. And he wasn't sure he was ready for this. "I don't need help! I've lasted this long, haven't I?!"

Tony also stood up, having enough of this already. "It doesn't matter how long you have lasted, Peter! It's about helping now! Just accept that! Your kids can be someone safe! And you're not

allowing that!"

The boy curled his fingers into his fist. "They *need* me! No one has ever shown them kindness. They know no one but me!"

"It sounds to me that *you* need them more than *they* need you," snapped Tony.

Peter paused, his eyes not losing the horrid burn that pierced Tony's own. "Fuck you. Fuck all of you."

Tony chuckled. "Oh, enjoy yourself in hell, dipshit." He approached the kid, and Peter stepped back a bit, still not losing his glare. "They will be protected. I know people who would gladly take care of them. You" —he poked at Peter's chest harshly— "are preventing them from having a normal childhood. So don't you *dare* disagree with giving them a normal life."

His glare was full of unwashed tears. The boy bravely refused to let them fall. And Tony knew it would take him a long time to accept, but he's going to have to let them go. It isn't as if he's going to separate them completely. And he is definitely not going to allow Peter to live out on his own.

"I'm going to do it, Peter. But I need you to agree."

Peter shook his head which only frustrated Tony more. Especially when the bloody kid turned away and started walking from the room.

"Peter!"

He didn't stop. Tony grumbled and went after him.

"*Peter!*"

"They need me!"

"No, *you* need them!"

Peter stopped and turned again. They were now standing painfully in the hallway.

Tony continued. "I don't wanna argue with you, kid. If you really cared about them, you'd let them go."

Peter didn't necessarily reply. There was no need to. Because suddenly, Peter was running forwards, a gasp of breath leaving his lips and Tony had an armful of the kid. It nearly toppled him over from the sheer forces. He was shaking, breathing unevenly against Tony's chest. And the Stark gently brought his own arms around the kid, his hand sweeping past his curls until they settled there, his finger squeezing smoothly.

"You're gonna be okay, kid. *You're gonna be okay.*"

Tony couldn't really comprehend the events that had happened. But he was currently driving with the kid in the seat next to him. He was asleep, curling into a ball in the seat to delve into the warmth of it. He was awed by Tony's car and apprehensive of where exactly Tony was taking him.

Tony knew exactly. As Peter slept last night, he contacted a few people and made arrangements.

The messages. Oh, the messages that exploded his way.

He's alive??

Holy shit!

Is he okay?

Haven't seen him in two years, Mr. Stark.

When is this gonna happen? I need to see him!

Tony smiled at those messages. There were a mountain load and it took a long time for the boy to calm down and for them to arrange something.

It is early morning, so Peter is a little groggy. He was told it was a surprise. They haven't talked of yesterday, and don't really plan to. It is going to take a long time to get any real arrangements done, so there is no need for any talking.

He stopped on the side of the pavement, already seeing the waiting boy. He was jittering, feet bouncing on the edge of the pavement. A rucksack accompanied his back and his eyes danced anxiously back and forth.

"C'mon kid, your day awaits you."

Peter groaned groggily, pushing Tony's poking hand away.

"It's your surprise."

Peter worked up a little. He stretched in his seat, a huge yawn shaping his mouth.

"Where are we, Mr. Stark?" he asked tiredly.

Tony only smirked and got out of the car. Ned still had yet to spot him as Tony went to the other side of the car to let Peter out. The teen stumbled out. His clothes consisting of newly washed and dried back on his stature.

Peter frowned at the normal street point. And Tony also recognised the familiarity in his eyes.

"Mr. Stark...?"

"Peter! Peter Parker!"

The boy jumped, his head whipping around to the voice. Ned was waving, a small jump on his step. Peter gasped, automatically gravitating towards his friend.

"*Ned?!*"

His voice cracked.

The car locked itself as Tony left, following in Peter's speeding footsteps.

"*Peter!*"

One step onto the pavement and Ned practically scooped Peter's into his arms, Peter's own wrapping over the boy's shoulders.

Tony was still far behind, so he couldn't hear them very well. But from what he saw, Peter was shaking and Ned had his eyes squeezed shut, the hint of water trailing down one of his cheeks. And Tony smiled. He smiled because he did this; he has reunited two very close friends after a good two years.

The sight was simply breathtakingly, melancholically beautiful.

Peter let go, but still had one arm on Ned and looked right at Tony. Smiles were pulling at his lips. Genuinely, it was a lot more than the grins Peter had given him yesterday.

Ned pulled his face from Peter's shoulder, wiping stubbornly at the tears that wouldn't stop falling. They both had a tight grip on each-other and Tony could almost hear the rush of adrenaline pumping through their veins.

"Mr. Stark—" Peter started.

"No, don't thank me," said Tony. "You deserve this kid."

Ned let out a breathy laugh, like he had been running a mile in order to finally sweep Peter off of his feet from the cold he has endured over the years.

"You're here..." he said breathlessly. "*Holy shit*, you're here."

"I'm *here*, Ned..." croaked Peter.

Ned brought his hands to Peter's cheeks, as if checking to see if he was really real. Which he was, and it made Ned choke on a dry sob. Peter too had a hard time keeping his little laughs of cry at bay. He again looked at Tony.

"Have a day off, kid, okay?" said Tony. He dug into his pocket and fished out a brand new StarkPhone, already and set up. He chucked it at Peter, knowing full well that with the kids skilful hands, he can catch it. And catch it he did. Before he could say anything, Tony continued, "That's your phone. Call me if you're in any need or any trouble. Oh, try Happy as well."

"Happy?" echoed Peter.

Tony nodded. "Yes, squirt. Happy. His my friend. Best friend, really. Head of Security. Happy trails kid."

Tony started walking away. Then, the boy called—

"Mr. Stark?"

When he looked back around, Peter was running towards him like he did last night. However, this time, he was smiling like a puppy, soft and cute. And he hugged Tony again.

"Thank you. Thank you ... for this."

Tony cuddled back, hands coming to the kids curls again.

Yeah, he can get used to this.

Chapter End Notes

i know i have said this for the past couple of chapters, but to me, my writing has been seriously diabolical lately. so, i seriously apologies for repeating words, the slow pace and cringe of it. i don't know why it's so bad as of late. once this whole series is done, i'm gonna be editing and fixing a lot of it. because all of it just seems so forced, and i'm really sorry about that.

to all of you commenting and putting kudos down really motivate me and make me happy !! <33 thank you all so so much!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For a while, nothing really happened. They were silent. They didn't talk science, they didn't talk Star Wars, and they certainly didn't talk of school.

Peter kept on looking at Ned, waiting for his friend to say something, *anything*, that will make everything okay. But, none of this will ever be okay again. Peter knew this. He knew this as Ned continued leaving subtle glances at his worn-out clothing. He recognises Uncle Ben's old jumper, the black shade a washed out colour of grey's and whites in various patches. He sees the peculiar light inside of Peter's eyes. His energy is too low. And the ringing in his ears too loud to drain and tingle his stupid spidey-senses.

Ned is clearly upset.

They walked towards their normal iconic coffee shop.

First of all, Peter panicked. He had no money. Guiltily, he looked after Ned once the boy showed him a couple of notes wedged in his hands. He was going to (happily) pay for Peter.

“Ned?”

The boy smiled at his name. “Yeah, Peter?”

“I—” he began, but cut himself off. Ned stopped them from walking in too soon.

He hasn't really changed that much. He was still his same adorably chubby-self, hair a little shorter and more styled from his eyes. Peter still stood taller by a couple of inches. The only difference is that Ned's eyes no longer held that childish glint for fun. They held maturity and experience. He's in University.

“You don't have to talk, Peter,” said Ned after a moment. “I don't want this to be a long, miserable day. It's sunny, somewhat warm … for the day, I just want my best friend back.”

In his voice, Peter knew it wasn't all that Ned wanted. Of course he wanted Peter to open up and just out-right tell him about everything that has happened. And that is something saved for the end of the day. That is, if Peter can hold it for that long. He thinks he may not need the help, and he can always hold himself together. But this is Ned he is facing. Ned, his best friend since primary, is here in the flesh and awaiting his explanation.

“C'mon,” said Ned, gesturing towards the coffee shop door. “Your normal hot chocolate with mountains of whipped cream and marshmellows is in there waiting for you.”

Peter sent a smirk Ned's way, following after him. “You remember me so well.”

Ned rolled his eyes playfully. “I don't think I have forgotten so easily. Especially when you raged for a good half an hour when they forgot your marshmallows.”

“Hey! It was not half an hour! It was a good twenty minutes.” At Ned's raised eyebrow, Peter pouted. “Plus, marshmallows are an important part of my love-life.”

“*Ugh.*” Ned gagged dramatically. “Your asexuality is showing again.”

“I wonder if its possible to marry a piece of food.”

“Hey, there's a guy who loves having sex with is car. I'm sure you can come clean with a few marshmallows.”

Peter shoved Ned, disgusted, but with a huge, mischievous smile on his face. Already, he is forgetting everything he deemed important to him. And at the thought, the smile quickly disappeared. He hasn't seen the kids in a good couple of days.

“Hey, dude, you okay?” Ned's voice pulled Peter from his train-of-thoughts.”We don't have to go in if you don't want.”

Peter shook his head, clean curls colliding with his face. “No, Ned, I want to do this. I want to spend the day with you. It's just...”

“Just what, Peter?” Ned's sincerity in his eyes made Peter almost melt into his friends arms again. But they needn't anymore tears. Not at the moment. “You can tell me. Just because we've been apart for these years, doesn't mean I have spilt any of your secrets.”

Peter smiled again, eyes looking at Ned through his long curls. Maybe he could next ask Mr. Stark for a hair cut.

“I'm just thinking of my kids,” he said quietly. “They're somewhat orphaned; runaways, shitty parents. The girl, oldest, took me under her wing. Now I'm doing the same with them.”

The pure affection and faith Ned still held in his soft, brown eyes is something Peter will never be used to.

“You're sweet, Peter, you know that? I believe that it is the effects of May.”

Peter tried not to flinch at the name. He hasn't heard her name since...

“*Shit*, dude, I am so sorry—”

“No, no,” Peter said reassuringly. “It's fine, it's fine … Uh, well, let's go inside.”

As they entered, Peter was suddenly confronted by the strong smell of coffee and the familiar setting of many tables filled with people, mostly in pairs, chatting and drinking their ordered drinks.

They went to the nearest, empty table and sat down. Ned made sure to place his backpack down on the chair, almost to show that someone else is going to join them and no one else is allowed to take that chair.

Ned announced that he was going to go up and order and get the drinks. At first, Peter protested against the idea, saying he should get the drinks. But Ned only shook his head, saying it was alright.

A lot of people lately have been saying to Peter, “*It is alright.*” Frankly, Peter was sick of it.

For the while Peter sat there, he carefully nit-picked the situation apart.

He trusted Mr. Stark enough to tell him about Ned. It was one of the best decisions he's ever made in all the two years he's disappeared from the outside world. Living on the inside did wonders, such

as hiding in shame from your friend. At the same time, it drained his natural colour of elation and stole that innocence he once had. Now what was left was a dark cloud that seemed to be hanging over his head one day and gone the next.

A mixture of emotions is not something he wanted to become.

Ned returned a few minutes later with a hot chocolate, topped with whipped cream in a perfect spiral, marshmallows accompanying each edge.

“Thank you, Ned,” said Peter, taking the cup from his hands.

Ned sat opposite, showing off his latte he ordered.

“Since when did you start enjoying coffee?”

Ned sighed when the coffee ran down his throat. A little hot, Peter imagined, but blissful.

“Since college,” said Ned. “It's a lot harder than my A.P.s, trust me. Sometimes I wish I had just taken an apprenticeship.”

Peter nodded in interest, scooping up some of the cream into his mouth by a plastic spoon Ned brought over. “What are you studying then?”

“I decided Chemistry, Physics and Math would do.”

“Awh, of course. I would have taken the whole of Science.”

Ned shrugged. “Fair enough. Would you of stuck with Math?”

Peter mimicked Ned's actions to the question. “It depends. Getting four degrees? Definitely would be up for the challenge. But, Math always had bore me.”

“Damn you, Parker,” grumbled Ned. There was no bite in it, though. “Getting amazing grades even when you find a subject boring.”

“Hey, I guess I'm just one of those guys.” They both laughed at this. “And anyways, you're a genius too Ned.”

“I was when you were there.”

Whether that was a bitter jab or not, Ned didn't express it in his voice. He sounded generally upset by this, and another stab of guilt poked Peter maliciously in the chest.

They sat in another bout of painful silence. Until Peter decided it best to break it.

“Hey, how is Flash and the rest of the gang?”

Ned spluttered over his coffee, already eager to fill in the gaps for Peter.

“Hey, Flash is actually a solid dude now.”

“No way!” exclaimed Peter, and it wasn't said sarcastically. “You've got to be joking me?”

“Peter, when have I ever been nonchalant about Flash? He's a changed man. He still teases, but in a good way.”

“The decathlon team? Have you all managed to stick together?” asked Peter out of pure curiosity.

He did really miss his team, despite the fact Flash made it harder. He wasn't necessarily a bully to Peter. The most he's ever gotten out of the boy is emotional abuse. Nothing physical, as Peter has always been a little taller than him. But Flash liked to taunt Peter. And maybe a session during gym gave Flash the excuse to push Peter around a bit, but other than that, he really did not care for what Flash thought of him.

“Liz had moved away after a very disregarding incident revolving around her dad,” Ned said sadly.

“No way...” said Peter. He always had a crush on Liz. (Which was apparently no secret as Liz had told him she knew). They remained good friend though. “What happened?”

“It was the night of homecoming,” Ned explained carefully.

Peter knew Ned was trying his best not to upset him, but at this point, he really did not care. He is the one who made the choice to run like a coward. He knew there was a Homecoming in a couple of weeks time. He knew when he ran, he would miss it.

“Her dad had tried stealing some of Mr. Stark's alien tech equipment. This was all including things such as the Avengers things. He was caught by something—”

The trail of Ned's voice quietened itself down in Peter's mind. That night of Homecoming. He was caught by something.

Peter gulped uneasily.

That was him that night.

It was a long hell of a night.

He had been following that guy, Toomes, for a good few weeks, catching up with all of his alien tech and the stealing he was doing for his family. During that God-awful battle, the Vulture had managed to rip off his mask and had beaten him, scratched him, slammed him into the sand over and over again. Then, Peter actually saved him from the fire. It was the last he saw of him. He webbed the guy up, left a note from Spider-Man and went on his way. That wasn't even the worst of it; he still woke up in a cold sweat when feeling the pressure of an entire building being dropped on top of him.

Did he know it was Liz's father? Heck no. If this was a movie, this would be one hell of a plot-twist.

“It was so crazy,” Ned finished. “Don't you think?”

Peter nodded uneasily, going in to take a long sip for his hot chocolate now that all of the marshmallow's and cream are gone. It was no longer piping hot, but the right warm temperature for him not to flinch at the heat.

“That is,” Peter agreed and put the cup back down. “Have you stayed in contact with her?”

Ned nodded. “Of course. She's in her last year of University. She's studying the Languages of Science.”

“Who became our Team Leader?”

A flicker of hope crossed Ned's eyes when Peter said “our”.

“MJ did.”

Peter raised his eyebrows. “M ... J?”

“Oh, right,” said Ned. “Michelle Jones.”

Peter nodded in approval. She had won at the last Decathlon competition. He remembers her. Quite rude and sarcastic. Peter never really had a problem with her, but it never excused her inability to communicate with human beings.

Once they finish up their drinks, they leave straight away. Ned plans on taking Peter to the quiet park they always used to hang out at. The flowers that used t grow there remained dead and starved for water for weeks it seemed. The trees and bushes were overgrown and no one even looked into the gates of this once beautiful park.

“What happened here?” he said quietly as they walked through the creaky gates.

Ned sighed sadly, going on the direction of the swings they always used to sit at. “A new park further up was built and people seemed to of forget about this one, with its old fashion swings, one slide and monkey bars. It's pretty much abandoned. No one bothers coming here now.”

They both sat down on the swings. Peter worried it wouldn't take his weight, considering how looped and rusty the chained were holding it up. Ned only shook his head at Peter's worried look and pushed lightly to start swinging. It squeaked loudly, but not for long, as they were only lightly pushing.

“MJ and I always come here on some weekends, just to hang out, and talk.”

“Oh...” was all Peter said. So Ned and MJ actually became friends. He wondered now what a trio them three would be if he stuck around.

“She had a crush on you.”

Peter giggled lightly. Even he wasn't oblivious enough to notice that. She was beautiful in her own way, with her tanned skin, hazel eyes and tucked-up curly hair. He was only put off of her because she was, for one, quite scary, and in general quite a rude person.

“You get all the pretty girls, Peter.”

Peter scoffed at this. “Ned, I'll marry you.” He said this with a hint of seriousness in his voice. He can't believe he has survived this long without Ned by his side. Now it feels as if he will not be ready to give him up again.

“That's sweet Peter. Still remember that deal from elementary school, then?”

Another giggle escaped Peter, shaking his head. “Of course I do. How can I forget?”

It was a little childish thing they did back in 2nd grade. Perhaps something a boy and a girl would do; Ned and Peter made a pact that if no one would marry them by the age of thirty, then they would marry each-other. This was simply because they were never popular, and never would be.

The squeaking stopped. Ned's steps stopped. There was the wind creating its own soft melody in their ears when neither spoke of them so much as looked at one-another.

Until this time, Ned broke it.

“What happened, Peter?” he asked softly. They still haven't looked at each-other, even after what he said. Peter let his head drop to his trainers, the ones Mr. Stark had gotten for him. “I know you probably don't wanna talk about it...”

No, he doesn't want to talk about it.

“But … I guess I'm just confused as to why you didn't, you know? come to me?”

Ned was now looking at him. Peter still trained his gaze downwards.

“I was at least hoping to see you at May's funeral. You never showed up.” There was a long pause. “You didn't even show up for May.”

This isn't what Peter expected for Ned to come out with. The pure and utter guilt he felt for not going to his own Aunt's funeral made him detest himself for weeks on end. Still, he can't stand the thought that he didn't go.

“I'm sorry I-I, um, I wasn't there, May. I—May, I'm so so sorry...”

Peter swallowed, remembering his pathetic attempt to redeem himself after everyone had left.

“I should have—I should have known, I'm sorry...”

“Peter? Please look at me...”

Peter did, vision blurry from tears gathering up at the edges. He saw Ned get up off the swing, coming over to him.

“Peter...”

His head fell forwards and Ned stood there, arms around his shoulders. One hand instinctivly went to his hair and the other rubbed up and down his back. Peter sobbed quietly, wracking his body in shivering shakes. He felt so limp, the only thing keeping him up being Ned—the boy was practically holding him up on the stupid swing.

“I'm sorry, Ned, I'm so sorry...”

It felt as if he was echoing what he had said to May at her grave.

“I didn't know what to do, I didn't know where to go—”

“Peter, it's okay. I hadn't realised—”

“No, Ned, i-it'ss *my* fault! If she hadn't been working-if, ya' know? I didn't discourage her to take an extra sh-shift, and that happened. And I was so scared, I didn't” —he chocked on the built up saliva in his throat and mouth, coughing whilst greedily taking in deep breaths of air. Ned continued to hold him, hushing him gently. “I'm *so sorry!"*

He didn't want to tell the whole reason as to why he never went to Ned. He would think he was so woeful, pitiful.

The cries lasted for a good few minutes before they decreased to plaintive sniffles. Ned moved way and Peter wished he could lean more into his friend.

“I'm here now, Peter, okay? Do you understand?”

Peter nodded, wiping the dribble from his nose with his sleeve. “I-I understand.”

Peter never returned to the compound. He never contacted Happy to pick him up. Never even sent a text to Tony to tell him he wouldn't be coming to the compound for the night. It wasn't necessarily a big deal. The kid, for one, always disappeared and din't come back for weeks. But he had put at least half of his trust in Tony, so the Stark cannot understand why he can't get even the most simplest of replied from Peter.

Chapter End Notes

all the comments last chapter, thank you my lovely's! :) <3 the motivation and encouragement just comes from all of you!

Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Just to clarify most ages:

Tony Stark: 48

Peter Parker: 18

Ned Leeds: 18

Wanda Maximoff: 19-20

Steve Rogers: 27-28

Natasha Romanoff: 27-28

Bruce Banner: 48

OC's:

Emily: 9
Thomas: 9
Millicent: 8
Allison: 5
Harry: 4

Jordan: 21
Connor: 23
Dorian: 19
Carter: 26
Aaliyah: 20

and yes — last part of the chapter from 16 has been changed to match this one.

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT:

just a quick notice: if anyone wants to publish my story on a different website, even beta it and publish it somewhere else, please, PLEASE, just ask me first. i see myself as quite a tolerable and friendly person, so do not be afraid to ask me any questions! you've all been so wonderful and i don't want to think any differently when you decide to edit my story and ask people to check it out without asking my permission first.

i’m sorry about that. you’ve all been great supports <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The right people had been called, to say the least. Much has gone down within the last two days of Peter going missing.

Firstly, Tony and Bruce finally brought up the courage to approach the tender ages of four to nine year olds. Finding that tunnel and seeing the kids Bruce has spoken fondly about were right by the entrance, a stance of fallen bricks and shoulders quivering despite the warming weather.

Each one of them bore skinny limbs and a hungry appetite.

With the right people been called, they were in safe hands. And will be for the rest of their lives.

However, one was missing. Scratch that — *two* of them were missing.

“Who is it, Thomas?”

Bruce was careful and gentle. He had a notepad — mini one — to write the information needed down.

Thomas didn’t want to speak. He was curled in on himself, tiny enough to disappear from any concerned and yearning gazes. Tony didn’t know what to say or do.

One of the kids were missing. And so was Peter. The ache that settled in his chest rattled his clenching hands. A cold sweat persistently gathered at the edges of his breakdown, because he didn’t know what to do.

All of the four kids, minus one, had been squashed together, frightened, crying, and begging to be let go. They thought they were being held captive, when that is completely opposite from the case.

“Thomas? Do you remember where Emily went?”

None of them were further frightening the children. The social workers were kind and collected, trusting and easy to talk to. Only when Natasha came into the picture did they truly calm down.

Dear little Allison had been scooped into Natasha’s arm. Bless her soul, she took the blonde and Millicent for a bath and new clothes. The boys, however were more of a struggle.

“Do you know where Peter is, Thomas?”

Tony watched out of the corner of his eye. The boy was scrounged in new attire, despite his bittersweet protesting. His cheeks clean from any infected wound or grime that had been living there for months.

“He came back,” Thomas said uneasily.

For goodness sakes, the boy is eight-years-old. He’s not a reasonable teenager — *adult* — who thinks they can look after themselves. Each brick dropped on that boy was held there, and he is still holding them, but with wobbling legs and quivering arms, he can no longer stop the painful stride of each step he further takes. One by one, Bruce is allowing a brick to fall, and Thomas became more comfortable with each passing moment.

“He came back? To the tunnel’s?”

Thomas nodded, bringing his fingers up to his mouth to chew on. Whether that is an act of nervousness or hunger, Tony couldn’t clench his own thoughts to worry.

Even as he stared at the screen in front of him, trying, trying so hard to find Peter, his brian wouldn’t allow him any more common sense. He isn’t going to find Peter this way. He needed to be patient with Thomas, because the other kids certainly are not going to contribute to the communicating with sudden adults.

Tony didn’t even realise he was leaning over a receptions desk until man ushered him off, grumbling to himself.

As it so happens, they were not currently at the Avengers Facility. Rather, at a hospital. Only Bruce, Tony and Natasha are here to stay; to help and to hope.

Bruce is sitting down on the cold-polished floors of the hospital, to make himself a lower level than Thomas. A tactic Tony should follow from the man, but he still cannot bring himself to listen to the kids’ sorrowful cries.

“To give us more food. But the others caught him.”

Tony’s ears started to wail in a high pitches ringing noise. He squeezed his eyes shut, frustrated with himself.

“The others?” said Bruce with slight worry. Tony imagines him now to be writing something down on his notepad. “Who are they, if I may ask?”

He is a child, Tony once thought again. There is no need for Bruce to become the professional he is. Then again, they were by no means trying to make friends with any of the kids. For they just needed someone to take care of them from now on. Someone who are going to love and care for them for the rest of their life. Neither Tony, Bruce nor Natasha are up for the job. They are there for the half-way line.

“They are Peter’s friends.”

“Are they really, Thomas?”

“I’m not sure...”

The wailing stopped when Thomas trailed off. Tony turned to find the boy fiddling with his fingers in his lap, biting on his lower, cracked lip. Blood was pooling at the edge of his thumbs from constant picking of agitation. The apprehension of coneistantly opening up to a complete stranger lingers within his movements of shuffling to get comfortable, causing Tony to pity the young one.

“For a while, Peter got food for us. And fizzy drinks. It was the best! But then Jordan talked to him and all that tasty food was gone.”

“As if this Jordan had stolen it?” said Natasha.

Thomas nodded, back to biting on his fingers again.

Natasha locked his eyes with Tony, gesturing him to come over. They were the only three (bar from the receptionist) in the area, so it was so quiet. Each tap of Tony’s shoes only made him cringe and wince, the echo bouncing off the walls obnoxiously.

He sat down beside Thomas, keeping his distance.

“Do you know if he had money with him?” said Tony.

Thomas shrugged. He wasn’t making eye contact with either of them.

In conclusion, Jordan had forcefully taken Peter’s money, which only led Peter to no choice but to pickpocket again. To Tony’s disapproval as well. Why hadn’t he just come to Tony? And sadly, he can answer that one question.

The kid had only just started putting his credence into Tony. That didn’t mean he was onto a higher level of friendship with the older man to tell him every single little thing. Unfortunately, Tony can only see that now, and hadn’t earlier on.

“Is there anywhere Jordan would have gone?”

“There are tunnel’s everywhere,” concludes Thomas. “You will just have to search every one of them until you find them.”

That night, Tony replayed that voice over and over again in his wakeful mind.

“*...until you find them...*”

Obviously, Thomas had some clue and sense to know where they are. He knows Jordan has possibly taken them somewhere Tony cannot work or find out about. If it wasn’t for Steve stopping his reckless behaviour, Tony would have flew all over the city in search for these two kids. One of which he cared more about.

He needn’t let Ned know of what has happened. Unless Peter has given his life-long friend his phone number and Ned has been once again left in the dark all alone and worried sick.

The next morning, Bruce came to Tony. It was time to move the kids into their foster care homes. It was a fast process, because Tony knew connection. And you can bet damn well he will be checking up on them to see if they really are the right home for them.

Firstly came Allison and Harry, the two youngest’s.

To Tony’s surprise, upon seeing the two, Allison ran up to Tony and he only had time to hold out his arms before she was climbing up him like a monkey.

“Hey,” he said carefully. Her head became buried in his neck, tiny little tremors wracking her body. He felt slightly uncomfortable, he’s not going to lie. The fact that a little child was trying to seek comfort from him just wasn’t his stance. He preferred keeping back and watching from a distance.

“Mr. Stark?” Harry pulled on his arm, big eyes staring wildly up at him.

He bent down, still with Allison in his grip. “You alright, buddy?”

Harry nodded and nibbles on his lip. His eyes wandered down and Tony had to ask again. He only repeated his action from last time, but this time, spoke.

“Ally wants Peter and Emily to have a home too,” said Harry.

“And they shall,” said Tony. “When we find them.”

Tony knows for a fact that Peter technically does not need a home to stay. He is, after all, eighteen, going on nineteen. The kid — or no, he isn’t a kid — is legal to find a job and look after himself. Perhaps the likes of University might help him out. The problem Tony has with that is Peter being all-too vulnerable to cone into contact with any form of education for the time being. And how he would react to even finding the kids all gone — all of them gone to the safe doors of a new home with blissful shelter and delicious, real food.

Peter deserves that too. When Tony places his mind to it, he wants to take care of Peter himself and give him that luxury he hasn’t had in years. Only now, the boy is missing and they have no trace into finding out where they are.

Tony carries Allison over with Harry’s tiny legs keeping up from behind him. A middle-he’d woman and man sat in the seats of the reception. Two of whom Tony has known for quite some while. They have already had kids of their own, with the oldest about to fly the nest.

Harry became shy and Allison curled deeper into Tony.

The woman, Lillie, stood up enthusiastically, hands tied together and lips stretched into a wide, welcoming smile.

“Hello, Tony,” she greeted politely. Her husband, Josh, followed, holding out his hand. Tony used his free hand that wasn’t holding Allison to shake the gentleman’s firm grasp.

He adjusted Allison in his grip and bent down to Harry level. Both parents did the same, as to not intimidate the boy. He clung to Tony, not looking anywhere — he is finding the floor of great interest. Carefully, Tony places his free hand on Harry’s back, rubbing soothing circles there.

“They’re gonna take good care of you, Harry,” murmured Tony. “Do you trust me?”

When the boy nodded, Tony smiled. It was a childish trust. Only this time, his childish trust is going to the right people.

Harry looked at Lillie, who has her arms open, inviting him in. At first he hesitates. There is no saying that he is going to automatically be comforted by a woman. Or the man beside her. For all Tony knew, the boys real parents may of been beyond horrific to him. But after a moment, the boy let go of Tony and toddled towards Lillie until he allowed himself to be embraced in a gentle hug.

Next is Allison.

Tony tried prying her from his grip to no avail.

“Allison, these people are going to take care of you,” said Tony. The girl whines pathetically, shaking in his grip. He sent an apologetic smile to the two parents and they only shook their heads with kind smile. Harry looked over from his clutch on Lillie and then let go, walking over to the

two.

“Ally?” he said quietly. She peaked up a bit at the recognisable voice. “They’re going to take care of us. Like your mommy and daddy once did.”

“But what if they go to heaven too?”

Tony didn’t think his heart could break more than it did then. To hear a child’s voice so cracked and high from the pure misery they felt pained in their heart. It’s something no child should ever have to feel. But here they are. And Tony is certain that millions of other children her age also feel like this.

Harry shook his head vigorously. “No, no, Ally, they won’t! I promise!”

A promise will not solve everything in this case. But as children, a promise means the whole world. So when Allison finally detached herself form Tony a bit more, he felt relieved and little hopeful that this is going to work.

“You can never break ... break a promise.” She sniffed, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her long-sleeved shirt. “And if you do—”

“I’ll apologise to you,” finished Harry. That apology, in Tony’s mind, obviously went a lot deeper than normal. So much deeper for a couple of little kids.

Reluctantly, Allison broke free from Tony’s grasp. He too was shaking, not wanting to see this child in pain anymore. He doesn’t think he’ll have the strength to to let any child go at this rate. Already, however, he’s let the one kid he needs most go. And he doesn’t know how he’s going to reach out to him when no one knows where he’s gone. Or if he willingly went in the first place.

It took a lot of time, to say the least. Tony managed to place all of the kids in waiting into safe places. All with caring and loving people. Allison and Harry in one home, Millicent in one and Thomas in another.

Well, Thomas isn’t in a home that he shall be cared for yet.

As manipulative as it sounds, Bruce and Tony have no choice but to use Thomas as bait. Not in a way to lure any of the others towards him, but Thomas is the only one who will know the closest bet of where Peter and Emily have gone.

They needn’t go back to the Avengers facility yet. They needed to stay by Thomas’ side, and that’s exactly what Bruce, Tony and Natasha did.

Thomas stayed silent on his bed, fiddling with the sheets that laid over him. He was snuggling now and then, simply from the enormous change in atmosphere. All of the kids have been sick for a while, but when becoming so immune to it, neither of them noticed.

It was a case really for the police. Not for Peter in particular — “Kid can disappear if he wants to.” — but for Emily. The only problem is, as soon as Bruce so much as mentioned the dreaded word, Thomas freaked and, to Tony’s astonishment, started crying. It took a few to calm the small one down.

Tony now sat on his bedside, in another bout of silence.

Time keeps skipping ahead and to him, all

he could think of how useless he felt. Again, he tried texting Peter.

Kid? We're not playing around. I hope you know that.

He couldn't admit to Bruce that he felt so scared for this kid that he had met just a good month or couple of months ago. Overtime they have bonded in an awkward silence and to Star Wars marathons. It all sounds like some sort of cliché setting for a great family movie. Only this isn't going to finish in a happy ending; Tony doesn't believe this will even end up with him finding his kid.

"My kid..." He scoffed at himself with a bitter laugh.

It is so obtuse of him to even consider Peter to even be apart of his life now. That A.I. Peter has fixed for him; Tony plans on giving the A.I. to the kid. Someone there to keep him company. Those silly marathons that transformed from Star Wars to Peter giving himself the courage to ask Tony more questions on science, on intelligible common sense that Tony can only mostly have with Bruce and Pepper.

From what Tony could make out from Thomas' mumbled was that there were sectioned tunnels placed around each part of the town of Queens. Scattered around them were thieves, drug deals and a couple of other things that both Tony, Natasha and Bruce knew that Thomas needn't know anything else about.

Only once has Thomas gone to this particular tunnel, time and place. A special one, he called it. Although Tony wasn't looking at the boy, or even posing to listen into what he was saying, but he was. His body is hunched over, staring off into space to let his ears peek at any indication of a new point of where Peter is.

Yes, time is ticking. And it's dragging on with a slow excuse of a story, but what else is he meant to do what his mind is so blocked with hatred and anxiety.

"It's special. Only Peter is allowed there. Jordan took me there once but Peter found me just isn't time," Thomas explained lowly.

Bruce hummed in acknowledgment. They were trying to make him talk more rather than them doing the talking for them.

"Who else goes there, Thomas?" Natasha soothed gently.

There was sniff and cough. Then, "Dory, Aaliyah and Carter and Connor. They go there with Peter all the time."

"And has Emily gone with them before?"

Tony looked over in time to just see Natasha placing her hand over his own. He didn't react to it, but it was a nice reassurance to show him he can tell them.

"No, she hasn't."

“Thomas ... where is this place?”

The wailing was there again, and Tony squeezed his eyes shut in attempt to block everything out.

And then a pin dropped.

“It’s not even a tunnel. It’s at Baisley Pond Park.”

Tony sat straight up, eyeing the boy who only looked down.

“*Why* didn’t you tell us?” Tony knows his voice is beyond gentle, but the fear that continued to eat away at his heart is just too agonising to bear. They have been sitting here for the last couple of days trying to get this boy to confess Peter’s and Emily’s whereabouts, and only now does he hunt at them that it isn’t even a homeless shelter — tunnel — they were confined in?

“Tony? Where are you going?” Natasha followed after him as he kept from the room and out of the door.

“Where do you think?”

“It’s Emily we need to focus on, okay? Just get her out of there.”

“Of course,” muttered Tony angrily. “Then I’ll save Peter.”

Chapter End Notes

> great! says me who will edit and fix this in a couple of weeks. can we all just agree that i’m full of bullshit? and any excuse i have is bullshit, so imma just keep quiet.
>
> also, yes, this seems forced and really poorly written. reasoning? huge, huge writers block. this chapter is, in my opinion, an enormous filler that i quickly stirred up in the moment when i finally finished editing.
>
> i apologise profusely for such an agonisingly long wait. it’s really selfish of me, and not fair on all of you who genuinely enjoy this story. so thank you all so much for your patience and time <3
>
> ps: thank you to everyone who helped me understand the american grading system. it helped a lot when i went back and edited the chapters! so thank you, my lovelies! <33

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

warnings for this chapter:

murder, suicide

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was too cold for a child to be living here. And what about the other kids? They are left alone, and nothing could be done about it. For they had trapped them in a hold that is nearly impossible to escape from. The water that trickles from the wood works and metal lining is the only water provided for Peter to give to Emily. He needn't worry for himself right now; it isn't the time for self pity.

Something as simple as this may be deemed as quite melodramatic. Of course Peter could easily take out Jordan and his friends if he wanted to. However, a line stands between Jordan and him defenceless in front of him.

Somehow, the git knew of Peter from behind the scenes. Because he had found his rucksack, along with that damn satchel and mocked him for it.

"Ooh, Spider-Man, aye?" he had laughed, holding up his pathetic excuse of a suit.

No one else had seen, thankfully. Even though his unmotivated side of him considers to give up at Spider-Man, Miles Morales from Brooklyn has given him the courage to be persistent with his role as a hero; even if it is just for the little guy, he still needs to play his part. Hear that? A boy, younger than him, has given him the courage to step up his game.

Now he's sat on the damp concrete ground. It covered the entire tunnel — or could it of been considered as a tunnel? The dark holes and silent streams cast it off as some sort of man-cave from hundreds of years ago. Although that is impossible — because it is a tunnel, Peter, for crying out loud — the atmosphere is filled with but the scents of burned wood and musty rock walls.

"It's okay, Emily... It's okay."

Emily isn't there. Not like she should be. Her form lay quivering somewhere with Jordan, or perhaps with Aaliyah. Peter doesn't want to make the decision on who is worse; must a boy who has an impact on everyone's lives at the moment become the authoritative figure to a little girl? One who will teach her the wrong; a world with no equality, patience, time and care. Or a girl, older than Peter, sell that wasted innocence into prostitution and captivity? Both are brutal for a girl. For anyone for that matter. Emily has already seen so much, and Peter has to sit there and watch as her child-like naïvety is drained and sucked by the cruel fangs of Jordan. More or less, the world they live on itself.

"It's okay, Em..."

His body wracked with shivers. He has his knees pulled to his chest in the hopes of some comfort. Ice-cold water was dribbling down his face, curls damp and unwashed. He didn't even want to

begin to imagine what a wreck he looked like right now. The hoodie he wore clung to him from the dampness and cold. His fingers are stark pale, it's blunt nails tightening on his upper arms.

"You singing to yaself, over there, Pete?" Jordan mocked with a laugh.

Peter shook his head. "Nah, mate," he patronised back. "Just waiting or a lullaby." It was said sarcastically; Peter no longer cared with how he treated Jordan. Hadn't the young man bullied Peter into submission enough? If anything, Peter should be taking advantage at the fact he's Spider-Man, but protecting his identity is what matters most. It's selfish and cruel, but the things that could happen, the thugs to come from this, it was just too dangerous. And although Peter considers himself to be quite the humble person, he can't help but think of himself sometimes. He need not only protect others, but himself too. Because at the end of the day, no one is there to protect him. If they even dare touch Emily, that is when things for them will come to an end.

Something dangerous flashed in Jordan's eyes as the other suppressed their giggles. Even Aaliyah was shocked with what he came out with. The Brit marched over, still seething and yanked Peter up by the collar. The smaller stumbled, a dizziness he can't comprehend setting in his mindset.

"Hey, what did I say?"

Peter growled, lifting his knee and kicking Jordan by his bladder. The taller gravelled his pain quite well, but it gave Peter the opportunity to push him down towards the floor.

"You wanna go there, Peter?" Dorian, who for once wasn't off his face, stepped forwards, pointing out his hand threateningly. Behind him, he had Emily. The whole time he had tried blocking out their diabolical plans for the future. They needed someone young and naïve such as her. If not, then their master plans will not work. There are many older people who would die to have a child like her in their wasteful and disgusting arms. Peter cannot, by any circumstance, let that happen.

"I'd rather you give Emily to me, thanks." Peter wishes sometimes he could shut his damn mouth. If anything, this is only irking them on further. "We can get outta your way."

Jordan was up again, and chuckled, slapping him on the shoulder. He kept his hand there, big and a tight grip, which unnerved Peter a little.

"Now, why would we do that, mm?" He then brought his hand to grip at Peter's curls and ruffle them non-too-kindly. It made Peter lean forwards a bit from the pressure. "C'mon, Pete, think more rationally."

Peter turned to Jordan, a bit desperate. He no longer cared; he and Emily are practically in a life or death situation.

"Jordan, can you just let Emily go?" He said it so quietly he wasn't sure at first Jordan heard him. But he did. Because his eyes flickered — not from recourse, but to more rage and thunder. Something Peter didn't really expect.

"Look at this, Pete." Jordan lured him over to the others. Emily tried reaching out to Peter when they neared but Connor slapped her hand away. "Look — these guys, who deserve so much be''er." He spins him around, eye-to-eye. "To me, who didn't deserve any of this."

Peter frowned. It is true; none of them deserved this fate. To be freezing cold and damp every bedtime. To pickpocket for survival on food and water. To bully others into giving them what they want. It's a truly horrible way to live; and most don't chose this fate. Some it's thrown upon, and they have a difficult time in lifting that load of bricks back off again. As of now, all of them have

many bricks to drop. For Emily ... Peter doesn't want to know how much she is withholding right now.

"Jordan," Peter started uncertainly, "I don't think you—"

"That's *it*, Peter! You *don*' understand!" he suddenly snapped, shocking all of them. Even his friends. Jordan's eyes wander behind Peter, looking at the other:. "You wanna know 'ow Peter got the money, guys?"

They stood in silence, not daring to speak.

"From Mister Tony Stark himself," he continued on, turning Peter back around to face everyone. "He's bin working for him. And I'm surprised by the little amount of money they are payin' you. What is it? Five dollars an hour? The minimum wage in New York is, wha'? good ten? Just a little over that? I thought they cared about ya, squirt."

Peter froze in place. Squirt? That's what Mr. Stark calls him. No one else does. Not even Aunt May called him that. Her names were more motherly loving, whereas he guesses Mr. Stark's are fun-loving. There is a subtle difference. What he didn't understand is how Jordan knew.

"You don't think I observe closely, Peter, do ya?"

Peter shook his head, not believing what was coming from the young man's mouth.

"You work for Tony Stark?" Aaliyah squeaked uncertainly.

"Is it true?" Carter said.

They were all staring at Peter. Emily and her stormy blue eyes were full of what Peter could see as hope. And they should be. He will get her out of this hurricane. He just needs to take little baby steps to the finish. Then it will all be okay.

Slowly, Peter nodded, pursing his lips for the outcome. It isn't as if it was one giant secret that had to be bann from ever telling a single soul. It was the fact that Tony Stark is a billionaire, and Peter can become promoted and get more money. If anything, he can now afford much better food than they have been able to smuggle. Only Jordan appeared to be angry at this, though.

"Do you ..." Carter started, still a little unsure. "Do you think he could ... he could help us?"

Aaliyah stepped up, her brown eyes glittering in genuine interest. "Just a little something's to start us off?"

"Maybe ... maybe a little job?" Connor looked as if he couldn't contain his smile; it was childlike, beaming and grinning.

Jordan growled lowly like a beast hunting its prey. They really are his prey. There is no escape and nowhere to hide for now.

"Are you fuckin' serious, lads?" His fingers wound themselves at the nape of Peter's neck. "Do you realise what he's done?"

Honestly, Peter didn't even know what he has done. All of them shook their heads, seemingly shocked and unresponsive to Jordan's outbursts. Finally, some time for them to stand up for themselves. Peter will be the first to admit that he's never really liked any of them. Perhaps Carter and him are civil, but the others he's never been fond of. Jordan, however, is a whole other string

attached, a young puppeteer controlling the strings of each of his puppets.

Them.

"How comes *he* deserves this treatment? How is it that *he* gets to suffer less than us? Do you not see? Do you not realise? He hasn't been through half the stuff we 'av." Jordan raged on, his grip on Peter's neck tightening. If he were a bull, steam would be pulled from his nostrils, glaring and eyes flashing a dangerous red.

Aaliyah visibly gulped. Her eyes were tearing up and Peter could only briefly understand why. Judgmental purposes take over when you somewhat despise someone. In another's hands, she has had many partners, but neither of them are consensual at all. And Peter blames himself for letting that happen. A girl and a boy should not be placed out there for them to sell their body; for so little as well. Is it really worth it?

Dorian, only a good few months older than Peter, became a drug addict only by the age of thirteen, by what Peter is aware. His father and him would sell them to pay rent. Only then did his father disappear, and Dorian had no choice but to keep up with his antics; street wise, per say. And eventually, became a suffering, dysfunctional unit, a bomb ready to explode at any second. His heart in in the line from the amount of white substances he has snorted, and if he were to give that up, his withdrawal afterwards will be hell to pay for.

Conner and Carter have been here since they were children. Brushed up the wrong way, their parents come from each other's rough area. Peter is quite certain the two are related in some way, but he's not sure how.

But Jordan — Peter's knows Jack-shit about Jordan. Although this circumstance is about to turn itself into an ugly injury, to add insult, Jordan gladly went off on one.

"Do you know what it's like to have parents who didn't want you? Who abandoned you? Who sold you for fuckin' drugs? Oh! Oh-*ho*!" He laughed bitterly. He pushed Peter down, kicking him once in ribs before settling his foot on the middle of his back. Peter let his cheek lay on the damp ground, listening intently on what the Brit has to say. "None of you would know—!"

"That's fucking *bullshit*, Jordan, and you know it!" Dorian pushes to the front, pointing an accusing hand and the man.

"Why is it that Peter is always the good one?" Jordan cries out, desperate. "Don't you see? He's the bad one, not me!" He lets go of Peter which give him the chance to stand up and take a breather. He no longer reaches out to take hold of Peter. Instead, Peter sees a flash and Jordan snatched Emily away from behind Aaliyah.

When everyone made a move, Jordan, all of a sudden, pulled out a Glock 43 and pointed it straight to Emily's head.

"Everyone! *DON'T MOVE*!"

A wave of silence took a hold of the echoey tunnel. No such word even cursed passed Peter's lips for him to scream at himself for allowing this to happen. Emily was like a statue, the hold Jordan had upon her forced and scarring.

Peter swears he hears his heart pumping more than it should. His breathing was escalating and the tremor in his hands were almost the exact perfect of Jordan's own ones.

The boy that Peter has come so little to know over the past couple of years is the definition of a

disaster. God only knows what he's been through, but that doesn't excuse him for being a controlling ass, in other words. Peter glances between him and Emily, expression unreadable. It seems as if Jordan is now a swarmed enemy of his, and if he doesn't react fast, Emily will die.

He made eyes with Carter, who seemed to understand the communication. What Peter wanted was for them to distract Jordan; for him to release Emily from his grasp.

"Jordan..." Peter said, barley above a whisper.

The eyes of said man flickered to him. The gun was still held still, finger hovering over the trigger. They danced between Carter's movements and Peter. As if he knew what the two were plotting.

"Don't fucking move, Peter."

Peter slowed his movements and held his hands up in defence. He couldn't let this happen. His senses were telling him to move, to be straight with Jordan and pry Emily's trembling form from his horrific stance. He looked ... *insane*. His eyes driven by the likes of drugs and tears pooling his eyes. His teeth was clenched and lip bleeding from the persistent biting. A jaw locked into place and the intensity; oh God, he is going to do it if they don't act fast.

"Jordan, listen to me," Peter said slowly. The man's eyes finally locked themselves into Peter's, tears now rolling down his cheeks shamefully. "Are you listening?"

"I am," he croaked out pathetically. "I am listening."

It's good; it's a good start. Emily's eyes were drawn to Carter's, who on the other side of Jordan was slowly inching towards him.

"I know you're upset—"

"*Damn right I'm upset*!" he exploded.

"Yes, Jordan," Peter repeated friskily. "But do you not see us? We're just like you."

"*How*?" His teeth clenched more, arms wrapping firmly around Emily's delicate throat.

"We were abandoned," started Peter, "kicked to the curb, no one giving a shit about us. We begged until we could no more, which led us to do the horrible things we deep down wish we never did." He took a step closer, and was relieved to find Jordan had nothing to say against this or act on a move. "You have every right to feel miserable, as we all do. But do you not see the potential here? I ..." He gulped with a little shiver wracking his small body. All he needed was to get Emily to safety, and then they can play dirty if Jordan so wishes to do. "I can help you."

Jordan laughed bitterly, spitting a chunk of blood to the ground. "You can't help me, Pete. There's nothing else for me to do..."

"Jordan..." Carter said soothingly. He had his hand raised lightly, hovering near Jordan's shoulder as if to comfort him; perhaps he was. The man's head whipped around to face Carter, eyes wide and distorted. "Look at me, how long have you known me?" When he didn't answer, he repeated, "How long have you known me?"

Peter felt a little confused by his questioning. What on earth did this have anything to do with dragging Emily away from Jordan?

"You took me in..." Jordan mumbled a little shakily. His fingers were as white as paper, knuckles

threatening to bleed out amongst the trigger whilst also splattering the earth with Emily's blood as well. "You saved me."

"When we were little," Connor said, stepping up a bit. "We helped you, Jordan."

"We helped you survive," continued Carter, now with his hand rubbing gently at Jordan's shoulder. "We took you in and offered help."

"And?" Jordan growled, shrugging off Carter's hand in the process as tightening his grip on Emily and the gun. Peter visibly froze, a frigid tremor to his stature. He can't bare to look into the eyes of Emily at this moment; instead, he found himself still staring questionably between Carter and Connor. The other two seemed just as perplexed as Peter, which gave him a little comfort.

"And - and it means you now have to think of us for a change." Even Carter grimaced at his own words. But Peter knew what he was getting at. Jordan was loyal to the wrong people for so long, and now it's time for him to be loyal to the right; to the people who took care of him the most and drove him to live and lead.

"We made you our leader," said Aaliyah. She took a hold of Dorian's hand, bringing his hazy mind forwards. "And we can take care of you. If you would just—"

"*Listen*," Peter synced with her. She blushed at his words, not out of affection, but out of pure embarrassment and shame for not being nicer to him. And he appreciated each bit of it.

Jordan looked torn between letting go of Emily and killing the insides of Peter's soul.

"Let it go, Jordan..." Carter gently started manoeuvring his hand towards the gun. Peter swallowed. It seemed as if the world had gone silent and everyone around them was holding their breaths.

The younger managed to wrap his hands around the gun, pulling it away from Emily's head. Jordan's breathing was erratic, failing from his tears.

"That's it..." Carter murmured gently. Peter doesn't think he's ever heard any of them be so calm and ... and soft before.

Emily's hand reached out towards Peter, fingers clenching in and out of her palm. "Peter..." She said this barley above a whisper. Peter looked at her, his own hand reaching towwards hers. Her words to him broke his heart. "This was never the way I was meant to live."

"*Peter*!"

His head whipped around to find Mr. Stark without his suit on come rushing towards him, Black Widow not far behind him. He froze and tore his gaze from Mr. Stark to find the fire and rage behind Jordan's eyes, his hand instinctively ready to snatch at Emily's still outstretched hand.

"Jordan! *No*!"

Jordan snatched the gun from Carter, and pulled the trigger, the bullet running straight through the boy's chest.

"*JORDAN*!" Peter launches himself towards him, Connor got on his feet. But the man had it, again pulling the worst image of all, up to Emily's head and—

Emily fell to the floor, and before any of them could do anything, Jordan lifted the gun to his open mouth and for the very last time, pulled that damn trigger.

Chapter End Notes

phew, i’m back again! finally updated. i am terribly sorry for the long wait. but i’ve been out of my kind zone lately, having ridiculously mountains of writers block for this chapter as well as assessments to revise for.

please do leave any feedback. it is now only two more chapters before this story is finished. thank you to everyone who has been a patient <3

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

> ... yup, i promised i would get this up ages ago. my excuses are running dry, but when i uploaded the last chapter, i was already a good 2k words in on the next and i saved it on a different draft than the other one i normally save it on ... my luck that day was shite and i ended up deleting it like an idiot. i was just so unmotivated to write another 2k words again so i left it for so long.
>
> but you all kept my spirits up and i thank you all so much for your support and loyal readings to this story! i apologise profusely for my lame excuses. please enjoy :) one more chapter to go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony wishes he could take that back. He wishes he could take himself and Peter back to the first day they met and start over. Perhaps that little stroke of luck and instinct to tell himself not to be too hard on the kid. Not to prod at an already open wound and gradually help maintain Peter's mentality. The two are perfect for one another. They both grew up with a difficult childhood — Peter more taxing than Tony understandably — and both have the talents for controlling the quantum's of science. Having Peter around had been incredibly therapeutic for the likes of Tony. And now watching the kid he has grown accustomed to love, his face devoid of any emotion, staring down at the tiny body of a girl on the floor is enough the crush the inside of Tony's chest. That look ... Tony doesn't think he's ever seen such a haunted look on a human beings face.

The fact that the other boy who had been shot was struggling for breath and he found the other kids had crowded around him, telling him to breathe; telling him that its going to be okay; they will find a safe place and lay him to rest. He doesn't register the sight of Natasha running over and tipping over his body, hands gentle and soothing against the pain of the boys chest.

All that stood in his line of vision was that God-awful torn look that was on Peter's face. He couldn't hear anything else and only focused his attention on Peter, as selfish as that sounds.

Plenty of times in the past he has seen the upmost terror and devastation riddled onto the faces of victims that his and the Avengers battles, of their heroic acts and arrogant ways have ripped families apart. After all of this time, after years of non-stop saving, Tony can't seem to ever save everyone. And he may have lost three worthy lives today, but the one he can only care about at the moment is the sight of the boy in front of him. That is it; that boys soul is lost and Tony isn't sure he will have the patience or confidence to even fix this boy. Is it even possible for Peter to be fixed? If so, it will be a long time running up that steep slope because Tony doesn't even know the story of how and why he ended up on the streets in the first place.

Tony approached carefully, stepping from his suit. He paid no mind to Natasha hauling the boy — Carter, Tony just about heard — up into her arms in the corner of his vision. His priority is Peter. And he couldn't help but reach forwards and catch Peter's descending body, limp in his arms as his knees gave out beneath him. It was almost as if the nerve cells in his brain had stopped working, telling his legs to give up on standing; it seemed as if he could no longer physically hold himself up because of the emotional stress signals in his mind are on high alert of danger mode.

The boy's head fell forwards as Tony's arms wound themselves around his waist and over his arms. Those curls, in the days of not being washed at the Avengers facility, has become grimy and greasy again. His curls fading into damp limps around his dirty face. No tears appeared on his cheeks from what Tony could see. Peter was oddly still, maybe a little tremor to his small body in Tony's arms.

"Kid?" Tony spoke gently. He adjusted them, stifling his own harsh breathing so Peter was almost sitting on his lap. "Kid, talk to me. Peter?" Tony leaned down with the boy, trying to push down the lump in his throat as he chanced a look at the dead little girl on the ground. Blood pooled beneath her, reaching the knees of Tony and soaking his trousers.

The girl was so young, and Tony had caused that somehow. He could just feel it. If he had been a little earlier, if he had been fair and kind, none of this would of ever happened.

Peter was still staring forwards, body awkwardly leaning more towards the ground. Tony couldn't just let the kid go. In his mindless state he would just fall forwards and splatter into the pile of blood.

He adjusted Peter again, allowing them to settle back and this time getting into a more practical position with Peter in between his legs, back against his chest and head resting by his shoulder. He was still staring off into space and Tony brings a hand up and pulls at Peter's hair gently. From the front he moved the fringe, pulling carefully to perhaps startle Peter back in consciousness'.

"Kiddy, it's time to wake up," whispered Tony, smacking Peter's cheek lightly. That didn't do anything. He'd have to somehow manhandle the kid home.

Beside him, Natasha gripped his shoulder, causing him to look around and then up at her. The other kids were gone, as well as the dead body of the boy who shot the girl and the girl herself.Even Tony cannot comprehend how long he's been metaphorically trying to wake Peter up.

"We gotta take him home."

Tony nodded, swallowing the bile in his throat as he struggled to get to his feet with Peter still in his arms. He would have no choice really than to carry the boy home. However, just as he was ready to stand up, Peter responded to that and slowly pried Tony's arms away from him. Both Tony and Natasha helped the boy stand, and Tony doesn't think he is in any state to fly home. He needs to get a cab that will be willing to keep their mouth shut about Tony Stark in a car with a kid along with Black Widow to the Avengers facility.

"C'mon, Peter," said Tony, helping Peter's legs to cooperate with his brain. The kid at least obliged to his gentle commands, walking forwards and keeping his eyes on the ground. Tony would have to talk to Natasha later about what happened to the two or three bodies and where the other kids have disappeared to. Right now, talking of that in front of Peter's vulnerable mind set would not be a great idea to endure.

They managed to catch a cab, the person managing to keep his mouth shut, much to Tony's relief and delivered them to the place Tony calls home.

It was a haze taking the boy up the lift and towards the many bedrooms that littered the halls. He didn't want to take Peter to the room he has been staying in for the last few months. Instead, he directs the boy to his bedroom. It was dark, curtains drawn by F.R.I.D.A.Y.s suggestion to keep Peter calm and collected. Not that that's going to happen.

He had lost Natasha downstairs somewhere as he manoeuvred Peter and himself upstairs.

He let Peter sit down on the side of his bed and bent down so he was looking up at Peter, hands gripping at the kid's forearms.

The boy was looking past Tony, mouth slightly open to allow his erratic breathing to pass his lips. He looked so damn numb. Tony wanted — no, he needed for Peter to be sad. He can't deal with the knowledge of knowing that this had been the last straw for the boy. That this is the moment Peter truly becomes a motionless void that Tony can't communicate with.

"Peter?" he starts softly. "Peter, buddy? Can you talk to me?"

There was no response to come from the boy. Tony cannot begin to imagine what Peter must be feeling. That girl, Emily, was Peter's only source of sanity and comfort. From the last few weeks he's been around Peter, he knows that the kid doesn't like being manipulated into submission; he likes to be in control, because if he isn't, then terrible things happen.

After some more prying, Tony deems it best to leave him with the door open. No one was around, Natasha out of sight. Bruce remained at the hospital with the children, that's all Tony can remember at the moment. He grabbed some snacks and fresh water, trailing up the stairs to give it to Peter. Tony was surprised when Peter responded; though not verbally, he shook his head at the offered snacks and drink.

"Peter, you need to eat," said Tony, for once not ashamed of the desperation in his voice. Peter shook his head again and quite hesitantly lowered himself down onto the bed. He kept to facing Tony, head just under the pillow, the huge covers almost swallowing him whole. He still had yet to cry, and Tony doesn't think he's prepared for a full-blown child meltdown.

For the next couple of moments, Tony tried pestering Peter into at least drinking, but that shake of the head was the only response Tony had gotten so far.

He tried again, this time taking away the biscuits and water, returning back with some warm milk. He's not sure how the whole 'handle a sad teenager' works, but he's trying. His own mother used to give him warm milk all the time before he went to bed. It was a placebo to help him sleep.

Peter didn't say anything as he left the warm milk on the bedside table. He let his hands brush through Peter's hair before turning to leave again, until—

"Don't leave me..."

Tony turned around, a little surprised. Peter was still in the same position, but his puppy-dog eyes found Tony's.

"Please don't leave me..." he repeated and Tony's heart almost broke in half.

Tony shut the door behind him and made his way over to Peter. "Hey, hey, kiddo..." he murmured. He bent down again so he was eye-level with Peter. "I'm not going to leave you, okay? Never. I don't want to do that to you."

He saw Peter's lower lip tremble and the kid started to sit up. There he saw — there he finally caught sight of the tears beginning to fill Peter's eyes. They overflowed rapidly, the waterfall dripping over his cheeks. Tony instantly sat on the bed, pulling Peter into his lap as the boy let out a chocked sob, burying his face into Tony's chest. Tony allowed himself to take a breather whilst bring one hand up to place on the back of Peter's head as the other arm wrapped itself around his back, pulling him impossibly closer.

Peter cried, and cried, and cried. His hands came up and clutched the back of Tony's shirt, pressing

his face further to cover his tears. Tony was afraid the kid would suffocate from his own spittle that built up at the edge of his mouth.

"Hey, hey..." Tony tried, subconsciously pressing a kiss to Peter's curls. "Hey, shh, shh ... it's okay, kid. It's going to be okay..."

Peter sucked in a huge breath and let out a loud sob again, his chest heaving. "I-It's all my fa-ult!" He cried in what Tony can only describe as pure anguish.

Tony didn't want or need to hear Peter blaming himself for what happened. He continued to hush the kid as he continued to sob and blame himself.

"If I was - was just faster or —" He jerked in Tony's grip, his chocked cries getting caught up in his throat. Tony pulled him closer, not caring that Peter is getting sweat, tears and spit all over whatever nice shirt he's wearing. "I could have stopped it! I could have stopped *everything!*"

Anguish didn't even *begin* to describe at the emphasis in his words. He sounded *angry*. Angry at *everything* and *everyone.*

*"*Peter, Peter—" Tony lifted the boy up, taking Peter's face into his hands. “Breathe for me, just *breathe*. Look at me—there us *nothing* you could have done. It isn't *your* fault."

"But it is..." Peter's breath hitched uncomfortably and Tony worried he was going to choke again. "I've failed all of them..."

”Shh, I need you to breathe for me. Slow down, kiddo.”

Tony heard the hesitance in Peter's voice to go on. He thought it was safer to dig deeper now, for Peter to let everything out now rather than later.

"Peter, what do you mean?" said Tony after a bit, still staring at Peter pleadingly. "Tell me what you mean, kid. We can fix this."

Peter cried in frustration and Tony pulled him down again. He began to persistently hush Peter gently, a little more harshly when Peter began to mumble self-blame to himself. Minutes into this catastrophe, Peter began to calm down, his sobs fading into light hiccups, the occasional sniff and a whimper.

"My parents are dead," Peter spoke quietly. It nearly made Tony jump. He wasn't expecting that. He again pressed another kiss to Peter's hair, soothing him back; letting him know that it is okay to talk. "My parents died ... died ages ago. I - uh - I don't ... really remember them."

Tony felt a shiver drag through his spine. He can never not forget the news of his parents death in the wee hours of the morning.

"My aunt May—" A tiny whimper pushed at his throat at the mention of her. Tony continued to play with Peter's hair. "My uncle Ben ... they took care of me. And they were ... they were great, like a mom and dad. I could always rely on them." There was a moments of pause, and Tony dwelled on the upcoming confession.

"It's okay, kid..."

Peter nodded against him, sniffing miserably. "I - I could have stopped it. Ben dying. I could have stopped that guy ... but I let him go ... I let him go." He dissolved into Tony more, cuddling up to him for the comfort he needs. Tony contently provides it. He has to refrain himself from telling

Peter that it isn't his fault ... but he doesn't know the full story. And he believes he us a long way away from that. And he respects that.

"And ... And aunt May ... I can't even begin to ... to—she died because of me. If Ben hadn't of died then she wouldn't of had to of taken - taken extra shifts at the hospital. If I wasn't there, she wouldn't of had to of provided for me..." His voice cracked at the end, letting out a wet, pitiful sob.

"Shh, shh ... You don't have to say anymore..."

"I owe it to you," Peter whimpered.

Tony shook his head ever though Peter couldn't see that. "No, you don't. You don't, kiddo. You're okay. I've got you, Pete."

They both sat there in a gradual silence that pierced Tony's ears. Eventually, Peter pulled away from Tony, sticky with tears and sweat. It's at that point where his cheeks and nose are a red splotchy colour, his eyes still wet with dripping eyelashes, but his cheeks have since dry and have gone sticky. Tony offers him a shower and when Peter agrees, Tony lays a pair of fresh new clothes out on his bed for Peter to collect.

On his way out, he took the milk that now felt a lukewarm and resided his stay in the kitchen. Tony i one to get things done as soon as possible, as shown when wanting Peter to get everything out as much as he mentally could. As soon as Peter is a little more freshened up and stable enough to walk on his own, Tony will lead them to the hospital so he can visit Thomas before the boy is placed in the hands of another. Tony wants Peter to tell the kids what has happened by himself.

So when Peter timidly made his way downstairs, dressed in some comfortable jeans a little lose on him for comfort and a large hoodie, Tony told him they would be going straight to the hospital. Peter immediately knew what the Stark was talking about and accepted his fate.

Tony used one of his cars to drive there and made sure Peter felt comfortable enough with going inside and led him towards the place where he knew Thomas and Millicent are for the remainder of the day.

Bruce was busy talking to Millicent as Thomas sat beside him, looking down and fiddling with his short, stubby fingers. Peter made a strange noise in his throat upon seeing them. Tony had his hand on the boy's shoulder but immediately let go when Peter started rushing forwards.

Thomas and Millicent looked up, their eyes brightening as if they had been introduced to a surprise birthday party.

"Peter!" Millicent squealed in delight, making a run and Peter bent down just to have her collide into him, and for the kid to scoop up this ... other kid ... into his arms and rest her onto his hip whilst cuddled into her. Tony watched in pure fascination as Thomas also wrapped his small arms around Peter's waist and the three collapsed to the floor in a pile. He could faintly hear the whispered apologies from Peter's part, tugging the two kids even closer to him.

"It's strange, isn't it?"

Natasha suddenly appeared beside him, making Tony jump. He clutched at his heart, managing to draw his eyes away from kids to look down at the red-head.

"What's strange?"

Natasha sought a faint smile to grace her features. "Seeing a kid his age ...being a parent to kids

much younger; to see the trust in their eyes for him."

Tony couldn't help but mutely agree on this and nodded. It definitely was a peculiar sight to uphold, for he never really thought of it that way.

Then, he remembered—

"Romanoff, what happened to those other kids?" he said quietly in case of Peter overhearing. Bruce joined them, telling them he's off for a little lunch break. They both nodded and started their conversation again.

"Those other kids..." Natasha said slowly, as if she hadn't heard Tony. "What can I say, Tony? I phone the cops, they ran away."

Tony swallowed guiltily at this. "What about ... what happened to that boy?"

"His name was Carter," said Natasha. There was a long pause. "He was never gonna make it."

Tony looked back at Peter and the kids to find him talking to them in a very low voice. He couldn't watch. He couldn't intervene; Peter has to do this himself.

"We'll be down at the police station soon," the red-head continued. "They want us questioned. And they need a proper place to bury the bodies."

Tony sighed uneasily, wiping his hand over his face just as he heard the first whimper of little Millicent. "Let Peter chose where Emily goes."

Natasha only smiled a little sadly in response before no longer wanting to hear the kids cries. She took off after Bruce in the end.

Tony kept his eyes on Peter, watching as the kid he's come to know and love comfort the broke hearts of two *very* young children. He let out a small smile of his own, his heart heavy in his chest.

"Don't worry, kid," he said to himself, but a message aimed at Peter. "I've got you."

Chapter End Notes

right, as there is one more chapter to go, it is most likely it is going to be the longest chapter in this story. so, i'll say my sorry's in advanced for the chance of a late update.

as always, your comments mean so much to me, and the support i get from all you lovely people are what i live for on this site. thank you all so much <33

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

finally! the epilogue ! a good 7.5k words.

thank you all so so much for giving this story a chance. it means so much to me.

i apologise if this isn’t the ending that you wanted. and some parts are a bit shit , i’ll admit.

probs gonna be posting this a couple of times. especially for endgame tomorrow because i’m a little shit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two Weeks Later

Peter sat stoic. The swing beside him swung back and forth like a rocking chair that hasn't been played with for many years. The grass levelling against the poles of said swing set were rusted from the top and a lushes green at the bottom. Peter recalls him and Ned hanging out here for years, and it turns out that is exactly why he is here for. He hasn't seen Ned for a few weeks now, and the presence of his friend not being beside him was quite disconcerting.

He gave a good once over of the park. How had he gone this long without visiting this at least once in the slightest? Even when him and Ned hung out in the first time in years he didn't notice the sombre cloud that misted this very playground him and Ned used to play in as kids. He's starting to wonder why this little park would ever be abandoned in the first place. After all, before he left him, it was still in full swing, despite not many people coming here anymore.

From his position, he could see the rusting of the working metal of the slide. He had a good guess that if anyone were to even touch that old ragged thing it would collapse into a heap of broken bits. The swings are thankfully still intact — rusty, squeaky, but mirrored in the place of a smoky disaster.

The monkey bars and climbing frames of wood were dripping with mould and weeds. Vines hugged themselves around each bar. It'a a vivid memory of his parents when he was tiny — taking him here, his dad would hold his waste as his skinny little arms grabbed each bar. It was so faint that Peter hardly remembered it; he can just about hear his mothers laughter, encouraging little Peter on, saying she was so proud of him. And then little Peter cheering, high-fiving his dad in victory.

A small smile graces his lips, looking down at his hands that rested in his lap. Those memories of his parents could only make him smile adoringly. It was just much harder to think of Ben because he knew him much greater than his parents. As for May ... he just can't think of her without wanting to burst into a waterfall of tears. But he mustn’t think of that now.

"Hey, Peter!"

Peter's head shot up, a little startled at the soothing, familiar voice of Ned. He jumped up from the swing and both threw their arms around each-other, squeezing in the time they've missed.

"How've you been?" Ned asked as soon as they pulled back from each-other.

Peter let out a small laugh. He might as well be honest with Ned. He's fed-up with all the deceptions and lies. "I could be better," he said. But then he managed a smile again. "But you're here. And that's all that matters."

Ned gave Peter his signature side-ways glance and patted his shoulder. They both took a seat on the swings, drinking in the abnormal warmth of New York. Ned places his phone on the ground beside the weeded poles as for it not to fall from his pocket. Peter had his own phone in his pocket from Mr. Stark — Tony, rather—

" *Mr. Stark makes me sound old, kiddo* ."

The emergency contact still remained as Tony, which he was thankful for. At first he thought Tony was just being a little too suspicious, but the man somewhat cared about him. And Peter appreciated it.

Aside from that, there is a reason why he invited Ned to talk. In this warm weather, it seemed appropriate to be outside. And for the rest of the while, it should be forecast as warm. Perfect for the end of the week, to which Peter is dreading.

He was wearing a checkered collared shirt and some normal black trousers that were a little lose. Tony told him after the week was over they would go on a little shopping spree so Peter can choose a few things for his wardrobe in order to look fairly decent when out-and-about. Not that Peter will be out too much for the foreseeable future. At least in his mind.

"I have something to tell you, Ned," Peter started a little shakily. "Something important."

"Something important." Ned repeated carefully. He turned his head, peeking from the corner of his eyes to look at Peter, who had his head down as it was. "Hey." He reaches over and took Peter's hand. Peter automatically looked up, taking in the kindness behind Ned's eyes. "You can tell me anything. What's the worst that can happen?"

Peter knows for a fact Ned will not stop talking to him after he tells him this. In fact, he'll probably freak and then become super passionate about helping Peter out, because Ned is that kind of friend. He just wants to help. And his help in the past has beenfor great use.

"Well..." Peter didn't know how to put this. So, in the most blunt way, he said, "I'm Spider-Man."

There was a short pause and Peter cringed at the unruly silence. It was like the impact before a tsunami like wave hit the back of you in the sea. Just as un-expecting as—

"Well, holy shit, Peter."

There wasn't the true excited tornado that Peter was honestly expecting. More or less, Ned seemed a bit bewildered.

Fair enough, most people would be. Most people's friends wouldn't drop a bomb like that on another, now would they?

"You aren't joking, are you?"

Peter shook his head, a little ashamed. He shivered a bit at the bitter wind that bit at his skin uncomfortably. Or maybe that's just the shame creeping up on him; he should have told Ned from the beginning. Ned will probably think that Peter doesn't trust him. He doesn't want to sound selfish, but in a way, he doesn't trust anybody. Not with his secrets or any bullshite like that. He just doesn't want to get too close to anyone, because he's like a black hole; black hole that just seems to suck in anything the come close to, destroying them as they come and go.

Tears nearly welled up in Peter's eyes at that. He pushed them down, looking over at Ned. He was shocked to see the biggest, most adorable grin set on the boy's face.

"Ned—"

"Peter, that's *amazing* !"

There's the excitement. The bit Peter was hoping for.

"How long, exactly?" Before Peter can even answer that, Ned is answering his own question anyway. "Why am I asking that? That's one hell of a long time, Pete..." His eyes go wide for a second, sadness suddenly filling them.

This is what Peter was most terrified of; he didn't care for disappointment much at this moment. Because he never wants to see Ned sad. It just looks so wrong on him.

"You've been Spider-Man for *years*," Ned said slowly. "So many. A few ... When you were gone, Spider-Man was still around." He sad frown just turned into a sad smile. Peter doesn't know which is worse. "I was so close to finding you ... yet so far at the same time."

"Ned..." Peter coughed wetly. He needn't cry, and Ned didn't either. "Ned, I'm so sorry."

"Peter, Peter..." Ned put his hand up a little, to signal his patience and understanding. “I understand why you wouldn’t want to tell me. You were trying to protect me. And I appreciate that.” His hand came up to rest on Peter’s shoulder. There was a moment of silence. Ned pulled his hand away and the birds were not outspoken by either boys. Until—

“Holy shit, *you’re Spider-Man.*”

Peter had to laugh at that. Ned’s face was in disbelief; his eyes told Peter that there were gears in his brain were rapidly trying to weave their way around this tidal maze.

“Try to not get yourself into trouble. There’s only so much people I can save.” It felt too great to banter with his friend once again. Something he hasn’t been able to feel in such a long time. There was another bout of silence. They really needed to think about having a proper catch up. Maybe creating a bunch of new lego sets. Peter doesn’t care how old they are. They have always done it, and he hopes they can continue until it is deemed rather strange for two grown up men to be playing with lego’s.

“You can come over whenever you feel like it,” said Ned quietly. He wasn’t looking at Peter. How did their friendship end up like this? Once full of cheeky glances and mountains of annoying

questions for each-other. Now reverted to awkward silences and quick-way looks that can only be described as a first meeting. “My mum misses you. Misses making dinner for us.”

“I can understand that,” said Peter. “I’ll come round. Only if it’s not too much trouble.”

Ned smile was still plastered to his face. He and Peter both wanted to fix this predicament together. And Peter is happy enough to do that.

“Of course it’s not too much trouble.”

Ned is a treasure. Despite everything Peter has done; lied and manipulated everyone in his life in order to keep a little secret from everyone else, people still remain and choose to keep close to him.

“You’re my best friend.”

“You’re my best friend too, Peter.”

The little sentences may be childish, but to both boys, they held so much more meaning and assurance. They had each-other, and other people backing them up. They would be okay.

-

Tony doesn’t need to worry so much about Peter. It took a little more than a few days for Peter to convince the Stark to be let out on his own. It wasn’t as if Tony was holding him on a leash. But ever since the last time he left Peter alone, the kid had gone missing for nearly 24 hours. That may not seem like a lot but it nearly gave Tony a heart attack.

Over these past few months, hanging out with a kid he picked up off the street and awarded him with food and drinks for his great work didn’t seem to be enough. Tony has been finding himself at a loss of what to do with Peter.

The kid is seventeen-years-old. That was fully confirmed to him. His full name is Peter Benjamin Parker, something the kid is of course keen on keeping. And he was a straight-A student at school. Tony could see a little mini-me in him. Perhaps that is why he took a liking to Peter. And at forst it scared him. He didn’t need to be involving a kid in the mess that is his life. But now, having grown quite close to Peter—as close as the boy has allowed him to—he realises that he had a job to do. That may not be saving the world anymore. But that includes taking care of and nurturing that sweet boy.

Now, Tony has taken some time off from tinkering in his workshop. He’s sitting on the sofa, quite relaxed with Peter on the other side, working on what looked to be school work.

As soon as Peter came to live in the Avengers facility, Tony made sure to make all the right and appropriate contacts. The kid keeps in contact with the younger kids. Their foster care system wonderful and making them happy; sending them to bed with full bellies and a hydrated mouth made Peter genuinely grin for the first time Tony has met him. And although there still shows a bout of sadness for not looking after them—for not being in control anymore—he’s allowed himself to accept that the kids will be safer under a warm roof with actual parents.

However, Tony still sees that phantom living within the depths of Peter’s eyes. It isn’t as if all that trauma is going to go away just with the snap of a finger. Tony and Peter together will have to work

with that. Not to mention that Peter had the support of the Avengers around him, including Ned and his friends mother. Even without Peter taking any notice were people looking out for him. And that's all Tony wants.

"You okay there, bud?"

Tony tries speaking with Peter as much as he possibly can. He heard from Ned that Peter was a right-little chatabox a couple of years back. Especially when he got talking about something he's really passionate about.

Peter looked up from his work and diverted his gaze to Tony. The boy still hasn't managed to fully make eye contact with him yet. He struggles inwardly, not wanting to trust any adult he comes across. It's the different kind of untrustworthy thoughts compared with the kids that Peter looked after. Peter didn't trust himself near adults nor people in his life. With the amount of loved ones he's lost, Tony is pleasantly surprised to see how valiant this kid is. No one deserves that much loss and trauma, yet Peter is still standing strong on two feet. That doesn't mean Tony knows any different. On the inside, Peter is struggling. He may not show it, but he is.

"Yeah…" The boy grimaced at him. It's no secret that Peter is still a little uncomfortable staying in the Avengers facility. He's been living years without a home. Now having a comfort bed and going to sleep with a full belly must be unnerving him. Even so, he struggles to eat. Not because his stomach in unused to such luxuries (perhaps it is, but Tony can see he's not struggling because of his stomach has shrunk to the size replicating a mouse) but because he feels unworthy of the food he is getting. And Tony often finds himself gently encouraging Peter to take one more bite. This also improved his own eating habits; he learned from none other than Clint that if a child—though Peter can hardly be claimed as a child anymore—sees another—an adult—doing something, they will subconsciously copy. And Tony hopes that is what he is doing.

"Need a little help?"

Peter looked back down at the papers. Tony has no clue as to what Peter is working on. The kid is smart. No doubt about that. But he's missed a lot of school. And it wouldn't hurt to catch up before applying to any universities.

"Yeah…"

Tony tried not to let the bewilderment show on his face.

"It'll be like old times," Peter continued quietly. He maneuvered himself from the sofa and Tony followed. Both sat at the breakfast bar, not too close together, but close enough so it looked as if they were interacting with each-other. "Aunt May used to love helping me with homework. No matter how complicated it was."

And Tony has to smile at that. The way Peter's lips quirked up at the mention of his aunt's name was so heartwarming. The pain of losing he will never go away, but Tony has been gently teaching Peter that losing someone shouldn't have to be viewed in a negative dark, but a positive light.

Tony places a hand on Peter's shoulder and squeezed. The boy didn't flinch or move; he kept his head down.

"I didn't take you for one to struggle with math, kid." Tony let his shoulder go and Peter only rolled his eyes.

"I enjoy math, doesn't mean I find it easy."

The two of them didn't exactly fly through the homework. Missing a mountain load of school has really taken a toll on the kid.

Tony felt a little sorry but then stopped that feeling as soon as the toxins entered his mind; Peter had told him he can't stand pity. All he wanted was for people to look at him as a normal person. Not a boy whose lost so much and could possible lose so much more. Despite the fact that Tony tried convincing Peter that the Stark wasn't going away anytime soon, Peter, understandably, still has his doubts and prefers to keep a miles distance metaphorically between those he has met at the facility.

During the time they worked on the maths, Peter grew a little more comfortable with repeating or explaining things back to Tony.

It happened like this all the time; Peter will be hesitant to allow Tony to interact with him and then gradually become unbolted as time goes on. However, Tony then finds himself at a dead end once again when their communication is cut off. When it's time to do something else or they just generally stop talking—this mostly happens when they are working in the lab together. They will be talking and then they drift off into a concentrated silence. Until they Tony has to break it and he finds Peter back to square one—back to being a shell of himself.

Tony watches Peter out of the corner of his eye. The Stark was leaning over a bit to get a grasp on one of the problem solving question at hand, watching as Peter's fingers twirl the pencil he had in his hand. He saw Peter's tongue slightly sticking out between his thin lips in concentration, his brow fixed into a frown.

"You having trouble there, bud?"

At first Tony thought Peter would ignore him. Not because he couldn't hear him or because he was being rude. But because his mind slipped passed the question as he was a little bit too focused.

"If you can, Mr. Stark."

Tony tutted. "You make me sound old, kid."

A small smirk danced on Peter's lips, still not looking up at Tony as he said, "You are old."

Tony's jaw dropped open. The little childish giggle Peter let out was enough to simmer the offence.

"I'll let that slip, Mr. Parker."

Peter pouted, finally looking to the side to catch Tony's mischievous gaze. "That makes me sound old."

Tony shrugged, leaning back. "What can I say, kid? You are getting old."

"He says whilst calling me kid."

There is one thing that Tony thinks he will never get tired of is the continuous banter they exchanged between each-other. That has to mean something, right?

-

It felt strange to be back in the woods. It held so many untold memories that Peter would rather forget. Through the dew-drop grass that ghosted over his jean-clad ankles and overgrown trees and bushes that tried wringing his wrists every time his hands danced along the rough bracken. Each little detail reminded him of those memories.

There were the same woods the Avengers chased him through, weren't they? He thought this to himself, head tilting upwards to look towards the clouds filling the depths of the blue sky.

New York is changing its weather again. Most of the time it remains cold, and sometimes it likes to treat people to a warm and sunny day. Today lay humid air over anyone walking underneath those delicate clouds. Peter happened to be one of them. But not out on the buzzing streets. He collects the rain up mostly in the wooded areas, near central park—near the tunnels he had come to memorise and know over the past couple of years.

How had this all begun, exactly?

"May, I'm sorry!"

Peter squeezed his eyes shut; it was like a horror movie, swing May like that. Bloodied, injures, empty … dead. The word is so blunt and Peter hates it. He never had trouble with knowing Aunt May was dead. It was the acceptance he had trouble with.

The bad dreams still came. He awoke in a comfy, warm bed rather than a cardboard box or concrete ground that filled his clothes up with unwashed water and God only knows what else.

It was easier to calm down from a dream of Ben. Of May. Because he was surrounded and safe. He just hoped that damn A.I. never told Tony of his misfortunate nightmares. Either way, it didn't matter; he for one told F.R.I.D.A.Y. to not tell Tony about this. He only hoped she would listen.

A low rumble from above him made him stop in his tracks. Scared of a little thunder? Not likely. In fact, he used to love it when the rain would shower the city whilst the low vibrations of thunder filtered and the lightning complemented its presence; him and May would sit by the window together, a hot chocolate within their holds as they talked quietly and watched the rain splatter against the window.

A sense of nostalgic sorrow stabbed deep within Peter's chest at that. Sometimes it felt as if he could never be happy again. But the thing is he has no other reason to be sad, no matter how much Mr. Stark told him it was okay to cry.

Peter trudged along, blocking that from his mind. As much as he loves looking back on the memories with Aunt May and Uncle Ben with a smile on his face, it still hurt … it *really* hurt.

A shaky sigh built up past his lips. His feet wandered over any branches he may trip over. His hands now beginning to stick to the branches of the trees. He needed to control the upcoming powers again, that's for sure.

Now that he's being fed three solid, healthy foods a day with little snacks in between, his body is finally beginning to fill out his skinny, weak limbs. And his sudden bouts of energy he's gradually getting used to … and it's because of Tony Stark. Who would have thought?

By the time he had reached the little open area to the mouth of tunnels, the thunder really began and a light drizzle pelted the sweater he was wearing.

There was no blood on the floor. Not even dried blood at the very least. Not that Peter wanted to see that.

“This was never the way I was meant to live.”

How could a little girl say such words? The force load that was handed to him after Emily’s words haunted him, and they will for the rest of his life. Every time, stubborn tears built up behind his eyes, knowing that Emily *knew* she was going to die.

He hadn’t seen any of the others since. Natasha has told him she couldn’t track them; that they had run. Nowhere to be found ever since. Perhaps they have separated? Stuck together? Moved away from Queens; away from New York altogether.

Peter jumped when a flash of lightning sliced through the sky threateningly.

It felt as if this tunnel had been vacant ever since all of them were here. Because when Peter entered the darkening pit, his eyes fell onto the one thing he was most desperately looking for.

None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for a petty little hate crime he had done for Jordan.

His hands trembled in the wake of the satchel. It was a little damp and Peter dig through it. Sighing in relief when he found the pages of Mr. Rogers—Steve’s sketchpad—were dry. A little crumpled from the rain before, but intact and still a beautiful sight of sketches to behold.

With a small smile, he slipped it over his shoulder and easily grabbed at the rucksack he left here as well. Firstly, he checked inside and found his suit still there, in dire need of a wash.

He found them. Check that off the least of things to complete of this week.

-

Never is it often Tony awakens during the middle of the night anymore. After everything that has happened, he’s found himself getting the support he needs and finds it does help him sleep, eat, even happier. The only times he only ever wakes up in the middle of the night is when he’s in the midst of a horrific nightmare. Even the little ones don’t awake him anymore. So he sits up, a little confuzzled when he doesn’t feel his heart thumping madly against his chest nor any feel of sweat running down his brow.

Beside him, Pepper is not there. Only then remembering she’s been in D.C. with Rhodey for the past month, organizing and fixing things about the Avengers as well as keeping up with the company. Tony doesn’t know what he would do without her.

Sighing, he turned over, ready to lay his head back on the pillow again when F.R.I.D.A.Y. spoke up.

“Sir, I should once again inform you to wake up; Mr. Parker seems to be in a state of deep distress and suggest it is best to tend to him.”

F.R.I.D.A.Y. has alerted him; that’s why he had awoken. His brain just didn’t process it.

Instantly, he flipped the duvet from him, a nervous sweat now breaking out on him for Peter’s sake.

He’s not stupid and knows for a fact the kid has trouble sleeping; that is evidence from his red

rimmed eyes every morning and evening. But Tony has never been alerted for any harm coming Peter's way so far. It's almost been three weeks; Tony is surprised this hasn't come sooner.

Peter's room remains a few doors down from Tony, giving the kid enough space to himself as well as being close enough for both Tony and Peter's mental stability.

Tony reaches Peter's door in record time and gently opened it, not wanting to startle the kid of he was awake.

He isn't. Tony flips on one of the night lights so he can at least see what is going on.

There were no screams or cries of distress coming from Peter. But Tony couldn't deny the unmistakable bouts of heavy breathing and occasional whimper that emitted from Peter's throat. The boy was curled in on himself, arms bunched up to his chest and head half-burying itself into the pillow.

As Tony cane cmose, he saw tear tracks staining the boys pale cheeks as well as more building behind those long eyelashes Tony saw on the first time of seeing the boy; ghosting over his cheeks like a birds anonymous shadow.

His whole body was shivering and his brow was shifted into an upset frown.

"You're too silent, kid," Tony muttered to himself. He's so glad he programmed F.R.I.D.A.Y. to pick up on all sorts of trouble.

He knew for a fact that trying to shake Peter awake will probably frighten disturb the boy more than he clearly already is, but Tony didn't want him to be trapped inside of his own monstrous thoughts any longer.

"Peter … Peter, buddy, wake up…" Anxiety lay deep within Tony chest. He pushed it down, knowing that he could do this. He can comfort this kid, just like Rhodey and Pepper have done with him. Like he had done those couple of weeks ago with Peter.

Tony hesitated before trying to shake the boy a little hardly, his hand then flying towards Peter's fringe to push those curls away from his sweaty forehead.

"Peter…"

There was a moment when Peter didn't move. Tony feared he had stopped breathing for one ridiculous second before Peter's eyes shot open and he gasped for breath.

"Kid—"

Peter sat up, clutching at his chest. His eyes squeezed shut and a pained cry broke past his concealed lips.

"I want my Aunt May…"

Tony immediately scooted onto the bed, making sure not to hurt Peter by accident in the process. He was a little on the edge, but that didn't matter.

His arms wounded themselves around Peter's shoulders and to his utter shock, the boy almost instantly melted into his touch; his head buried near his chest, one hand coming up to clutch at his shirt and the other squashed between Tony's side and his own.

“Shh…”

“Mr. Stark … I wanna go home…”

Tony didn’t know what to say; what do you say to that? At the moment this kid was giving access to his full vulnerability and Tony can’t even find the right words to say anything.

“I know you wanna go home, kid…”

Another sob came from the boy. Tony squeezed him a little tighter. He has his fingers running smoothly through Peter’s curls which felt as if they haven’t been washed in a while. He still isn’t used to having a shower everyday.

There was a moment of silence; it wasn’t awkward, but it was definitely tense.

Tony sighed, not thinking much when he pressed a light kiss to Peter’s forehead. The boy didn’t scoot back. Was Tony imagining it when Peter snuggled closer?

“What did you do at home, Pete?” Tony asked. “What did you, Uncle Ben and Aunt May do?”

He waited cripplingly slow for the answer.

“We would play board games. You know chess? Or monopoly. Any of that frustrating shit.”

Tony couldn’t help but chuckle at that, his fingers still brushing through Peter’s curls soothingly.

“Movie nights were a thing every Saturday. Ya know? Because it was the only day Ben, May and I had off. O-of course I was off Saturday and Sunday, but - uh - yeah, they worked everyday apart from Saturday.” There was a light sniffle. Peter moved away from Tony, but didn’t let go. It caused Tony’s hand to slip from Peter’s hair, but he still had a firm but gentle hand on the boy’s upper arm. “What days do you have off?”

Tony tried not to look at the tears that still resisted within those puppy-like eyes. They were still sad, or just numb. Tony couldn’t really tell. But what he could see was desperation.

“I’m my own boss, kid.” Tony smiled when Peter looked down with a giggle of his own. It was wayery, the sniffles not going away anytime soon. “I’ll take Saturday’s and Sunday’s off for you.”

At that, Peter looked back up. The tears had stopped falling, and there was still a painstakingly anaesthetic look in his eyes, but they sparkles a little; a little like childhood innocence.

“Really?” His voice was a little high. Tony was beginning to adore this kid more and more.

“Sure.” The Stark shrugged. “You will have to help me in the lab more, though. I don’t want myself getting behind.”

Peter giggled again, finally pulling out of Tony’s embrace. The man felt the boy’s clutch on his shirt linger for almost a second longer. A short pause frame stood between them and Tong was afraid he had said something wrong. Until—

“Thank you for cheering me up.” Peter looked up at him. That sweet, boyish smile still planted on his features. “Thank you for not … asking straight away. Just … moving onto a different subject.”

So he had said the right thing? He had done the right thing.

Tony reaches forwards and wiped a remaking tear from the boy’s face. “It’s okay, Peter. You don’t

have to go through that alone. Come and talk to me whenever you feel comfortable to. No pressure, kiddo, but I'll be here."

Peter bit his bottom lip and Tony saw a blush arise on his cheeks. Before Tony could ask what was wrong, the boy spoke, "C-could you maybe, um—stay here tonight? Of course should don't, um, have to. But, your hugs…" He trailed off. Tony waited patiently for him to go on. "Your hugs may not be Aunt May's. Nor they're nothing like the ones Uncle Ben have, but all three of you have that … have that calming aura about you."

Tony understood what the boy was getting at. "Yeah—scotch your pooch, kid."

Peter smiled shyly and did as he was told. Maybe it was a bit strange for them to sharing a bed. But when Peter crawled back over to snuggle up against Tony and lay his head on his chest, Tony knew this is what he wouldn't mind getting used to. Feeling someone like Peter—a brilliant kid and such a strong and valiant individual soul to be tucked up against him is enough to chase away his very own fears.

If this is one of things to make Peter happy, he will gladly oblige to that.

"Good night, Mr. Stark."

Tony moves a little so they were both laying on their sides, Peter still tucked up to his chest and arms around each-others. Tony rested his chin above Peter's head of curls and tightened him into a protective embrace.

"G'night, Peter."

-

Emily's grave was resting by the end of the line. In the children's line. Peter couldn't bring himself to look at the others. He finds it unfair that the world had to take these children so early. So damn early they disappeared. And Emily is one of them.

He was crouching down, running his thumb over the fresh headstone.

The funeral was small. The kids showed. Alison spent the good majority of her time curled up in Peter's lap and clinging to his leg when he stood up. A few times he picked up Harry and allowed him to talk to him. He was too young—as well as Allison—to really understand what was going on. Allison remained sullen whereas Harry was a little more upbeat, babbling to Peter of his new family.

Thomas was a little distant. It hurt Peter to see him like that. But him and Thomas only exchanged a few sentences to each-other before the boy wandered back over to his new family.

They are incredibly sweet people. They had two older girls, one of which apparently spends as much time as she can with Thomas; to make him feel free and comfortable in their household. Peter greatly appreciated their efforts to try and bring Thomas from his shell, but the loss and pure terror he has experienced in the past isn't going to wash away anytime soon.

Everyone else are gone. There was no small afterparty; Peter felt as if Emily wouldn't want her death to drag on like that.

He felt a little more lighthearted that not only did Tony come to support him, but so did Bruce and Natasha. He had become quite close to the both of them. Natasha nor Bruce are the most open people, a bit like Tony, and all four of them seem to make some sort of trauma filled chemical mix. Peter doesn't really see the positives in it, but there is something good in that. In a way, they all compliment each-other.

Now it was him remaining. Or at least he thinks it is. The quiet surrounds him are bleak and unnoticed. The headstone given to this child is small, simple, pretty. It was smooth with her name curved into the stone. ***Emily.*** That's all. Peter never knew her last name. And next to that name lay the outline of a dove, beautifully curved in with a petite flower in its beak. Her date of birth, ***17.05.2009*** , was the only other information Peter knew about her. And he felt like shit for not knowing more. The problem was, she never let him know any more. And it isn't as if he ever told any of them much about him.

"Hey, kid."

Peter appreciated Tony's gentle approach. He didn't want to have a hand on his shoulder at the moment; he also didn't want to be alone for so much longer. Just with Tony's stature there, waiting patiently for Peter in time is enough for him.

Peter sat there for a little longer. No tears came to his eyes; he felt numb, void of any emotion at the moment. It caused him to sigh and stand up finally, lightly dusting off his smartwear for the funeral.

"I've something to show you," Peter said quietly to Tony. The man's eyes didn't hide the confusion that had set in, but he nodded anyway, allowing Peter to lead the way.

They were both slow and approachable. They were wandering quite some metres away from Emily's grave. Peter found himself following his own heart into the headstones filled with older people. Right at the end, near trees that blocked the sun but also shielded them from the rain.

He found himself then standing in front of Ben and May Parker, his Aunt and Uncle. He hasn't visited them in a while. No flowers remained by their graves. Leaves had fallen onto the ground where they lay. Someone had made sure they were together when buried. The sentiment was sweet and Peter let a small smile ghost his lips.

"This is Uncle Ben and Aunt May." Peter gestured lightly towards them, feeling Tony nearly pressed up against him. He didn't move away. He knew his parents were also nearby. Once again, he would show Tony this as well, and despite them being his parents, he felt it right to at least show Tony his Aunt and Uncle. Who of which were like his parents; his true mum and dad. Because he never really knew his parents; Ben and May, however, will never cease to being his parents. "I've never, um—I've never actually seen May's … May's grave." His voice trailed off, the burn of guilt eating at his insides. He curled a little on himself.

Tony didn't question it and instead pulled him into a hug. Peter settled for this, knowing that this hug meant a thousand words. And he knows Tony is trying to slowly get used to the parental role. Peter knows that no one could ever replace what he had with Ben and May. But he knows Tony is trying. And he neither is discouraging it. He respects Tony, and he's slowly coming to terms with his childhood hero becoming his guardian. Even if it's just for little while. He will be eighteen soon.

Peter wrapped his arms around Tony's waist, savouring that protective touch. A kiss was placed to his curls and he let a tear slip past his eye. He's been crying a lot. On his own, mostly. Regardless of hating crying, it's better than feeling that hollowness on his chest that he can't seem to get rid of

from time-to-time.

“They’d be proud of you, kiddo.” A hand made its way to his curls and he welcomed it. Almost how May used to play with his hair. “This sounds cheesy but you’re the strongest person I have ever had the encounter of meeting.”

Peter giggled as they pulled back. Tony was smiling too, dark eyes sparkling.

“Can we go home?”

Tony almost did a double take when Peter said the word ‘home’. Peter can’t blame him. He’s still not accustomed to the facility being his home, but it’s starting to embrace him like the heart of one.

“Sure. We can go home.”

-

It was decidedly a week later Peter figures it would be best to get it over and done with. He’s had a good few interactions with Mr. Rogers and the blonde has not brought up his stachel once. Peter felt a little bad; maybe he had forgotten about it? Peter isn’t stupid. He can see the familiar looking phantom with Mr. Rogers eyes. It was unnerving to see the Captain America like that.

He owed it to him. He owed it to Tony as well. That’s why he had no trouble with neatening the satchel, swinging it over his shoulder and stepping from his room in the evening. Yesterday had been the events of Emily’s funeral, and Peter figures nothing could go wrong here; they all needed a good laugh and a session to become a little nonchalant for the evening.

The hallways were quiet. He knew a lot of the Avengers would be asleep by now. The only ones he guessed would be awake are Mr. Rogers, Mr. Barnes, Natasha, Bruce and and Tony. They never really slept. Peter neither did, so it wouldn’t be surprising to catch him sneaking around at nearly the stroke of midnight.

He heard the light chatter before he entered the living space. As he guessed, the sofa’s were occupied by all of the five he had thought of. Although, from the door, he could see that Bruce was nodding off a bit, the purple bruises under his eyes suggesting he hadn’t slept in quite a long time.

It felt great having his heightened eyesight again. For the past couple of years it felt as if his eyesight had reverted back to his original shit sight, when he had to have glasses. The thought made him cringe. Most of the time, that radioactive spider can be a blessing.

He wasn’t really planning on handing Steve the satchel just like *that* . No. That’s too simple. And Peter tends to like being a little dramatic.

He looked down at his web shooters snugly fitted around his wrists from under the sweater he was still wearing. In his own mischievous thoughts, his tongue poked out from between his teeth as he flexed his fingers in and out of his palms.

He made sure the satchel was still shit before he came out of the hallway and into the living room. But not with turning straight to the wall and beginning his flight upwards.

At first, sticking to walls and climbing upside down had made him almost sick. Now it gives him a

sweet adrenaline rush, the exhilarating feeling slamming full force into his chest when he made it above Mr. Rogers. No one had noticed his presence.

Gradually, he activated his web shooters for the first time for ages and sneakily lowered himself from the ceiling, sticking to the long string of web, descending slowly.

The ceiling was high up, but not too high.

Soon, he was nearing Mr. Rogers. No one still handy noticed him. Or maybe Natasha did, because he swore he saw a brief flicker of her's and his eyes meeting before she turned her head, a small smirk on her face.

By the time he was a good dozens of inches away from Mr. Rogers was when the others noticed.

" *Kid!* " Tony exclaimed in shock, leaping from the sofa. Bruce awoke suddenly, Natasha started laughing, Mr. Barnes shuffles back in surprise and Mr. Rogers almost jumps from his own skin upon seeing Peter smiling brilliantly at him, upside down, hanging from a web ring.

"Peter!" said Steve.

Peter giggled whole-heartedly, keeping the satchel in place before removing it from his shoulders. He held it out to Steve, a shy blush now covering his cheeks. "You said you wanted it from me." He felt Mr. Rogers stare for a moment in disbelief before slowly taking the satchel, hands careful and delicate to the fabric of the item.

Peter settled himself to stand up, a little dizzy bit otherwise okay. He flattened his hair, watching nervously as Steve pulled out the things he had kept; the sketchbook, picture of that beautiful lady, pencils … It was all there, apart from his wallet that Jordan had stolen. And of course they had taken back his bank card a couple of months back.

"I tried keeping it safe," mumbled Peter, picking at his fingers. "I'm sorry about the pages of the book. They got wet, a-and I tried drying them. And I didn't snoop too much—"

"Hey, buddy, calm down." Tony reaches out and squeezed his shoulder, giving him an assuring smile.

Steve looked up at Peter from his spot on the couch. The smile that broke out on his face was enough to put Peter at ease; it was soft, small, and just so Steve Rogers.

"Thank you, Pete," he said. "What you did was wrong, yes; but the fact that you kept it safe and out of harm's way … I'm grateful, kid. I really am. So thank you."

He was. And Peter was grateful for his appreciation.

"Wait…" Everyone's gaze turned to Bruce, who's eyes showed nothing but pure exhaustion. His curls bouncing from his head as he tried digging up. "What is going on?"

Well, it looked as if this whole time the butterfly effect of Peter taking Mr. Rogers satchel never caught up with that poor scientist. Surely he must of known briefs; he would have questioned why Peter was here a lot. Or everyone currently roasting him for being so oblivious has taken its toll on him; the scientist was clearly talking about what was happening in that current moment.

Tony arm wound around Peter's shoulder, a smirk on his face. "How about we tell you tomorrow, Brucie-Bear. Looks as if kids need their beddie-bye-time."

“I’m not a kid,” said Peter, crossing his arms over his chest in a pout.

Tony chuckled. “Oh, I’m not talking about you, buddy. I’m talking about that one.” He pointed his gaze to Bruce who’s only response was to scoff and make his way from the room.

Yes … Peter can definitely get used to this. although the ghost of what happened in the past will continue to haunt him, having a new family will be able to help him get through that atmospheric event.

”So...” Bucky murmured under his breath.

Natasha continued from his words—

“You’re Spider-Man.”

Chapter End Notes

and wow. i’m finished. holy cat , i actually finished another book !

thank you all again ! do leave comments and tell me your thoughts ! i love reading them :) especially now that endgame is just around the corner.

i wish all of us luck when it comes out. i’ll be staying off of the internet as much as possible to avoid spoilers xD

-25th — bout’ to go in. no spoilers!

follow my insta @alifetimex — i posted about iron dad and spidey son !

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!